十文字 青
イラスト＝白井鋭利

level.3
思い通りに行かないのが
世の中だと割り切るしかなくても
Presented by Ao jyumonji / Illustration by Eiri shirai

灰と幻想のグリムガル

（はい）（げんそう）

OVERLAP

著＝十文字 青 イラスト＝白井鋭利
灰と幻想のグリムガル

Bri spread the map face-up on the ground and drew his lamp over to illuminate it.
It was a drawing of the main stronghold area of Capomorti Fortress.
"The master of the fortress, the Keeper,
is thought to reside within one of three watchtowers."

"I'm not a dimwit!"
Mogzo swung his cleaver sword in all directions endlessly. In his all-out offensive, he never paused, even for breath.
"That's right! No, you're not! Show me what you've got, Mogzo!"
He was like a different person... or perhaps Mogzo really was like this all along.

Characters

Team Renji

Ron — class: Paladin — *The team's No. 2.*
Sassa — class: Thief — *Gaudy girl. Probably masochistic.*
Adachi — class: Mage — *Four-eyes.*
Chibi — class: Priest — *Mascot.*

The Daybreakers

Pingo — class: Necromancer
Shima — class: Sword Dancer
Kemuri — class: Paladin
Lilia — class: Shaman

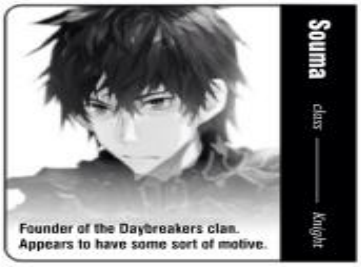
Other

Kikkawa – class: Warrior
Hayashi – class: Warrior
Michiki — class: Warrior
Mutsumi – class: Mage
Ogg — class: Thief

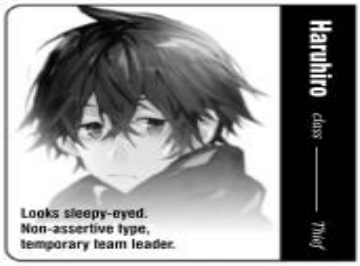
Other Characters

Renji class — Warrior
Leader of Team Renji.
A savage beast. Badass.

Manato class — Priest
Party unifier.
Was a decent sort. (Past tense.)


Souma class — Knight
Founder of the Daybreakers clan.
Appears to have some sort of motive.

Yume class — Hunter
Inherently comforting type.
Talks kind of funny?


Haruhiro class — Thief
Looks sleepy-eyed.
Non-assertive type,
temporary team leader.

Shihoru class — Mage
Timidly thoughtful.
Hard worker in the shadows.

Ranta class — Dread Knight
An impulsive, selfish, vulgar person.
Unpopular Person No. #1

Mary class — Priest
Icy beauty.
A little older and more experienced.

Mogzo class — Warrior
A "bear" type.
A little dimwitted,
but dependable bear.

Chapter 1: Myself, Natural Talent, and Bittersweetness

PART 1 of 2

“Ranta! Don’t get too separated from us!” Haruhiro warned as he circled behind the kobold foreman Mogzo had engaged, looking for an opening to exploit.

Not that it was hard to find. There! Again now! The elder kobold’s defense was full of holes. He could easily take it down. Haruhiro watched as the elder’s tail swiftly swished all around, but he had grasped the pattern of its movements now.

If Mogzo attacked in ‘A’ way, then it would react with ‘B’, then do ‘C’ next. And if not ‘C’, then it would do ‘D’ for sure. Haruhiro was able to predict its movements. He was confident he could finish it quickly with either [BACKSTAB] or [WIDOW MAKER].

But he didn’t close in. He didn’t want to finish it. Simply killing it was not his goal.

He wanted the line to appear for him. That hazy, indistinct line that glowed like fire. He wanted to be able to see it. Master Barbara of the Thieves Guild had once told him, “The line that you see—feel, perhaps is a better way to describe it—appears once or twice to anyone who’s accumulated enough experience.”

She had also said, “It’s not like we can will it to appear by concentrating hard or anything.” And though she told him, “That’s not a bad sign,” she also warned him. “But don’t be mistaken. It’s not anything special.”

It appears once or twice to anyone who’s accumulated enough experience. But it had appeared more than once or twice for Haruhiro. And it had appeared for him bright and distinct when he killed Deathpatch. If the line hadn’t appeared, there was no way Haruhiro would have been able to kill the kobold boss.

Deathpatch would have left Haruhiro behind and gone after everyone else; maybe even killed them. How many would have died? Theline had saved Haruhiro—had saved them all.

But it appeared by coincidence. It just happened to appear for him. And if that was the case, then it had been pure luck; Haruhiro had just gotten lucky. If fortune hadn't been with him, then everyone might have died.

Haruhiro didn't want to believe that they had been saved by nothing but fortune. He didn't really understand his own reasoning, but he did know for certain that he wanted to see the line. He wanted to be able to see it at will. If he could make it appear whenever he wanted, then he would be… invincible?

Not that he had any ambitions to become godlike or anything, but he did want to be strong. He wanted the strength to turn the tide of battle when it mattered.

"THANK—!" came Mogzo's finishing blow.

Line… c'mon, appear! C'mon! Appear, line! Haruhiro begged. But diagonally down Mogzo's sword came; behind the [RAGE CLEAVE] technique came all of Mogzo's terrible physical strength in a single crushing blow.

Mogzo's sword cut a good twenty inches down into the elder kobold's shoulder, rending the chainmail it wore as if it didn't exist. Mogzo's strength was unbelievable. It wasn't all muscle though, it was also his new sword: The Chopper.

Everyone had given suggestions for the name of Mogzo's new sword, but in the end Ranta's suggestion "The Chopper" was adopted. The sword was of average length at about four feet long, but its blade was incredibly thick. And though it had a cross guard, its overall appearance was that of a giant meat cleaver.

It was the sword previously owned by Deathpatch, but Mogzo was also making very effective use of it. He kicked the kobold foreman down with a grunt, then brought the blade down onto its head, cracking its skull open like an egg.

"NEXT!" Mogzo shouted.

Damn. Awesome and badass, Haruhiro thought.

"Haru!" Mary called, while he was being awed by Mogzo's prowess.

"Er… y-yeah!?" Haruhiro yelled back.

"What the hell are you doing!?" Ranta railed.

Ranta was the last person Haruhiro wanted to hear that from, but he had to admit he'd been a little spaced out just now.

Lately, they had been hunting elder kobolds in the residential-like third stratum of the Siren Mines. Most elder's talismans fetched high prices at the market, and after they eliminated Deathpatch, the third stratum was a relatively safe place to do their hunting. The income they garnered here was very stable.

That wasn't to say that the danger was zero, however. This was still enemy territory and they would pay a price if they let themselves become complacent. Mogzo had taken out the foreman, leaving only two kobold workers. Ranta worked on Kobold A while Yume and Mary teamed up to take on Kobold B.

But just then another elder leading three little piggies—er, workers charged towards them from a little ways off. Right when they thought the remainder of the fight would be a breeze because the toughest of the bunch was down, the world went and threw a wrench in their plans.

"Six of them!" Just as Haruhiro finished the headcount, Mogzo yelled "THANK YOU!" and crushed Mary and Yume's opponent, Kobold B.

"Uh, make that five!" Haruhiro amended.

"Take this!" Ranta locked blades with Kobold A and shoved in hard.

It was his new Dread Knight skill, [EXPEL FRENZY], where he'd press in with his sword to hold back an opponent who had gotten in too close before leaping back and putting more distance between them. It wasn't supposed to be a flashy technique, but Ranta had a way of over-exaggerating anything he did.

Haruhiro had to admit, though, that [EXPEL FRENZY] did have the potential to combine well with other techniques.

"[ANGER THRUST]!"

Ranta had executed the technique outside of range, but took a step forward to make up for it and drove his sword into the base of Kobold A's throat. It was instant death for the kobold and Haruhiro reluctantly admitted that Ranta looked kind of cool for a split-second there.

It wasn't just his fighting techniques that had improved; Ranta was also equipped with a new helm. The bucket-shaped helmet that he had been so partial to was damaged beyond repair, so he'd bought a new bascinet helm, complete with a pull-down visor. It was used, but painted black and Ranta had said something dumb about that making him look like a kickass Dread Knight should.

Well, Haruhiro had to concede to that a little now, because Ranta did seem very Dread Knight-like in that split-second of a moment.

"Uh… four more to go!" Haruhiro yelled, slightly flustered as he began to call out orders again. He was the leader, after all. "Mogzo, you've got the elder! Ranta, take one of the workers and take it down fast! Me and Yume will take the other two!"

Mogzo engaged the elder with a shout. When they locked blades, Mogzo executed [SPRIAL SLASH] and pressed the attack, forcing the foreman back.

"[HATRED'S CUT]!" Ranta leapt at Kobold C. His initial attack was deflected but Ranta kept pressing forward, unleashing an offensive flurry.

Yume attacked Kobold D head-on, and when it countered with a swing of its shovel she performed a low somersault to avoid it; her new skill, [FOX VAULT]. It was actually considered to be a kukri-based technique, although Haruhiro didn't see why; the weapon was never used directly. Yume closed in again on the surprised Kobold D and executed her [SWEEPING SLASH] and [CROSS CUT] combo, forcing it to retreat.

"Whoa!" Haruhiro shouted, though he wasn't trying to make a ruckus or anything.

Dueling a single opponent wasn't really a Thief Class forte. Kobold E swung its shovel at Haruhiro multiple times while Haruhiro deflected its attacks with [SWAT]. The shovels were used for mining, but made with metal from handle to tip, so they were also effective as weapons.

[SWAT] was mostly a defensive skill, but if the opportunity arose, Haruhiro could also use it to create an opening in his opponent's defenses.

He did so now as Kobold E brought its shovel down in a wide arc. Haruhiro dodged rather than deflecting with [SWAT]. Kobold E realized the danger and quickly drew its weapon back in. It attacked again, but this time with a smaller, more compact swing, going more for speed than power.

Now! Haruhiro thought and deflected Kobold E's shovel with [SWAT]. It wasn't the usual [SWAT], though. Haruhiro put strength behind the technique to force the kobold's shovel off to the side and away from its body. The kobold was now wide open.

Haruhiro stepped in towards it, using his left hand and right forearm to grab and arm lock Kobold E's right arm. Kobold E yelped when its elbow became immobilized, even as Haruhiro swept its feet out from under it and brought it to the ground.

It was the new technique that Master Barbara taught, or rather, pounded into him: [ARREST]. And while it felt nice when he executed it perfectly, it wasn't really a flashy technique.

While Kobold E was still on the ground, Haruhiro stamped his foot hard on its jaw. A kobold's head was shaped like a dog's; their bite was powerful but the bone structure was delicate. The way their jaws were built made them especially vulnerable to attacks from the side. Kobold E was now unconscious, or close enough.

"Oom rel eckt pram das!" cried Shihoru.

A fuzzy, black seaweed-like shadow elemental shot from the tip of Shihoru's staff, flying through the air in a tight spiral.

"Yume, watch out!" Shihoru warned.

Yume ducked with a yelp as the shadow elemental flew past where her head had been. It hit Kobold D straight in the face and began to seep into its body through its ears, mouth, and nose. Kobold D's movements ceased, its body stiffening like a wooden board.

Shihoru's new technique, [SHADOW COMPLEX], was a spell that literally got into the heads of enemies to bewilder them. She had picked up this particular spell because she wanted more offensive abilities and, indeed, unlike [PHANTOM SLEEP], it would work even on alert and strong-willed enemies. The spell choice suited Shihoru very much and was incredibly useful in combat too.

Even as Yume watched, Kobold D suddenly tossed aside its shovel, looking incredibly confused. Yume attacked furiously with her kukri, punctuating each swing with a shout. By the time Kobold D regained its senses, it was too late. Yume had shredded up its body so badly that there would be no counterattack.

“ARGH!” Ranta finished off Kobold C with the [EXPEL FRENZY]-[ANGER THRUST] combo he had been so enamored with lately.

PART 2 of 2

Mogzo’s grunt came from nearby, and Haruhiro wondered if the elder was putting up a tough fight. No, that’s not the case, Haruhiro realized. The elder seemed to have found an opening and was bringing its sword down on Mogzo’s left arm. But only because Mogzo was purposely letting it.

Mogzo was now equipped with a steel fauld that protected his waist and steel vambraces on both arms. Both were bought used, but had been refitted by an armorer. And Mogzo had also acquired a new fighting technique to complement his heavy armor.

The elder foreman’s sword came down on Mogzo’s arm with a heavy clang, but glanced off. It wasn’t simply a normal deflection though; it was the [STEEL GUARD] technique. He didn’t belong to the Warrior’s Guild, so Haruhiro didn’t really know the details behind it, but it was some sort of special way of reinforcing one’s armor with one’s energy so that all the enemy’s attacks would bounce off.

And as if that wasn’t enough defense, the entire team was under Mary’s [LIGHT OF PROTECTION] spell which enhanced physical ability, resistances, and sped up the body’s ability to heal itself. The spell probably had something to do with the God of Light Luminous, as his hexagon symbol floated above everyone’s left wrists while they were under the spell’s effects. According to Mary, it could be cast on up to six people and lasted for up to thirty minutes. Haruhiro felt the spell’s effectiveness as his body became noticeably lighter, which enhanced his fighting ability enormously.

And maybe thanks to [LIGHT OF PROTECTION], Mogzo also moved swiftly to finish off the elder.

“THANK YOU!!!” Mogzo shouted.

Of course Mogzo would use [RAGE CLEAVE]. It wasn’t just his standard finishing move, it was a powerful, stable and most of all, a magnificent, technique. Mogzo’s sword crushed into the shoulder of the already off-balance elder. It was almost the exact same way he had killed the first foreman.

Mogzo's form and style were elegant and, unlike Ranta, he never resorted to doing weird shit and cheap tricks just to try to look cool. He was a simple person in the good sense of the phrase. He stuck to the same basic techniques, but practiced them so often that he gave them his own customized, unique form of their own.

Maybe Haruhiro was overstating it a little, but there was no doubt that [RAGE CLEAVE] in Mogzo's hands had gone from an average, run-of-the-mill technique to a devastating killing blow. Of course [RAGE CLEAVE]'s effectiveness must also have been affected by things like the user's physical strength, proficiency, and weapon quality, among other factors, but what made it so effective for Mogzo was undoubtedly his timing.

Whenever he recognized an opening, Mogzo used it. The precise timing with which he used [RAGE CLEAVE] made Haruhiro want to give Mogzo a standing ovation every time he saw it. In fact he wanted to applaud Mogzo even now… should he actually do it?

As Haruhiro considered that, Ranta attacked Kobold D from behind. Yume already had it on the run, but Ranta's attack finished it.

"Hahaha! YESSSSS! Got my Vice!" Ranta proclaimed.

"Stupid Ranta!" Yume shouted. "Yume could've handled it alone!"

"What was that? You were gonna kill it with your own hands? Ms. Washboard, seeking blood like a wild beast!? Ha! You wanna devote yourself to Lord Skulheill too?" Ranta offered.

"No way!" Yume replied. "Yume is a Hunter who loves the White Goddess Eldritch. Yume just thought that if she's goin' to battle against the poor kobos one-and-one, Yume might as well see it through to the end! And don't call Yume flat!!!"

"Yume, it's one-on-one…" Haruhiro couldn't help but correct her but was, as expected, thoroughly ignored.

"Flat-chested is flat-chested! If you don't want me calling you flat, then grow them bigger!" Ranta shot back.

"Yume doesn't know how to grow boobs bigger!" Yume said earnestly.

"You do it like this!" Ranta turned to Yume and made some sort of massaging, fondling motion on his own chest.

“Sexual harassment!” Shihoru protested, glaring daggers at Ranta while Mary sighed and muttered, “Utterly despicable.”

“I’m the best!” Ranta shouted, veins in his temple bulging. “The best sexual harasser! The utterly despicable best! Bring it on! Nothing you say will faze me! I’ll become the most utterly despicable sexual harassment king!”

“Hm…” Yume pondered and copied Ranta… or rather, she was actually fondling her own breasts. “Do they really get bigger? ‘Cause I sure don’t feel them growin’! Or is it harder to grow ‘em than it looks?”

Mogzo made some sort of choking sound while Shihoru quickly grabbed Yume’s hands and said, “Y-Yume… that’s not something you do in front of other people!”

“Oh, so it only works if I do it in private?” Yume asked.

“Um, no… I don’t think that’s the case…” Shihoru replied.

Ranta scoffed. “What’s the big deal? Keep massaging them! They’re so small no one watching is gonna see anything!”

“Douchebag Ranta!” Yume cried.

“I’m not a douchebag! I’m the Most Utterly Despicable Sexual Harassment King! It’s my newly gained title and don’t you forget or regret it! Now bow down to my pervertedness!”

“Quit saying that like it’s a good thing,” Haruhiro said as he began to search the kobolds’ belongings.

None of their equipment was sellable, so he contented himself with their talismans. As he crouched near a body and carefully removed an earring talisman from one of the worker kobolds, Ranta suddenly jumped near him and tore off a gold nose ring from a dead kobold nearby.

Haruhiro deeply disliked Ranta’s rough treatment of the bodies. There were also plenty of other things Haruhiro disliked about Ranta. In fact, he disliked almost everything about the guy.

“What?” Ranta glared at Haruhiro. “Got something you wanna say to me?”

“Not really,” Haruhiro replied.

“Let me say this to you then.”

“What?”

“Haruhiro,” Ranta used his thumb to flick the gold nose ring into the air and let it land in his open palm. “Don’t start getting any big ideas.”

“Big ideas?” Haruhiro asked. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You think you’ve become some kind of hero, don’t you?” Ranta accused.

“Hero?” Haruhiro repeated.

Only stupid Ranta would think something retarded like that, was Haruhiro’s instinctive response. But the words quickly grew heavy in his chest and he didn’t reply right away. A hero, huh? Haruhiro had never entertained any thoughts of becoming one. None at all. Not even the slightest shadow of a thought. But…

“Your movements in that fight just now,” Ranta continued in a tone so low that none of the others could hear him. Strange, since Ranta wasn’t the considerate type. “Were really weird.”

“No way. It was just the usual,” Haruhiro denied.

“No. You were acting weird,” Ranta said. “Like you were one step slower than usual. Or maybe not slower… you were trying to do that, weren’t you? The one hit kill move.”

Haruhiro didn’t answer but shrugged his shoulders minutely. He tried to keep his expression neutral, but felt himself breaking into a cold sweat. Because Ranta was right. How could a guy like him even notice in the first place?

“You’re not hero material, Haruhiro,” Ranta continued. “Got it? Know your limits.”

He patted Haruhiro on the shoulder sympathetically. Haruhiro wanted to slug him in return, but he didn’t bother. Nothing Haruhiro could say to a person like Ranta would matter. Ranta, would you even understand? No, he wouldn’t. Ranta didn’t understand how Haruhiro felt at all.

Haruhiro had almost died. In return for his companion’s lives, he had almost traded his own. But everyone lived, they even killed Deathpatch, and everything was wonderful. All’s well that ends well, as the saying goes. But it only ended well because they had gotten lucky.

Haruhiro wouldn’t have been able to do it if the line hadn’t appeared. He supposed that maybe he should just be satisfied with receiving fortune’s favor that time and not think too deeply on it. But what about next time? What if they ran into a situation like that again? Should he just leave it up to chance then as well?

No, that wasn’t an option. So what could he do?

He had two choices. The first was to bet that they could avoid getting into dangerous situations in the first place. And, of course, Haruhiro intended to try his best to. The second was to turn chance into certainty. All he had to do was make it so that he could see the line all the time.

But it wasn’t that simple. Master Barbara had told him before, “Sometimes it appears, sometimes it doesn’t. It’s not like we can will it to appear by concentrating hard or anything.” It wasn’t a reliable technique and becoming dependent on it would be a mistake. And Haruhiro realized the wisdom of her words.

However, he couldn’t resist entertaining the possibility. If he could make the line appear at will, then it would mean that he was a born warrior. Naturally talented. And wouldn’t that be awesome? he thought to himself.

“Haru?” Mary inquired.

Haruhiro hadn’t even noticed that she had crouched next to him.

“Err—something wrong?” he asked.

“I should ask you the same,” Mary said with a slight smile. “Is there something on your mind?”

“No… not really,” Haruhiro lied.

If they weren’t on the third stratum of the Siren Mines and if no one else was around, then maybe he would have confided in her. Or maybe not, regardless of where and who was there.

“I’m fine,” he tried to reassure her.

“Really… if you say so then,” Mary said, entirely unconvinced.

And Haruhiro knew from her expression that she didn’t believe him. The look on her face made him feel like he had done something horrible to her and made his chest ache with a dull pain.

This is… completely unfair.

Chapter 2: Coincidence

After returning to Altana, selling the loot, splitting the profit, eating dinner, heading back to the now familiar reserve force soldier lodge, taking a bath, and returning to his room, Haruhiro was ready for bed. Except that he didn’t feel like going to sleep right away. The lamp hanging from the wall had already been put out. Besides the two straw-stuffed bunk beds, that lamp was the only other furnishing in the bare-bones room.

Haruhiro wanted to say goodbye to the lodge and find a better place to stay. It wasn’t as if they were financially incapable of this, but for some reason he still found himself

undecided. Haruhiro rolled over onto his side as he lay on the top bunk. Mogzo was on the bottom bed of the opposite bunk while Ranta occupied the top. The bed under Haruhiro was empty.

A room meant for four people, but currently only housing three. In the beginning, there had been a full four. Haruhiro started to whisper the name of their dead companion but stopped. He started to climb down.

“Haruhiro?” Mogzo asked from the opposite bunk. “Are you okay?”

Ranta was snoring lightly, already asleep.

“Uh…” He couldn’t come up with a good answer so just avoided the question. “Wrong? No, nothing’s wrong. Not really…”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realized that he could have just said something like, “I’m going to the bathroom,” and regretted not thinking of it sooner.

“Are you leaving?” Mogzo pressed.

“Ah, no. Just… going outside. For some air,” Haruhiro replied.

He was just saying the first thing that came to mind now, making the mood entirely awkward. But Mogzo didn’t pursue the subject.

“Oh, okay then,” Mogzo said.

“Yeah. It’s been a long day, right? And you sound pretty tired so get some rest, okay?”

“Right. Goodnight, Haruhiro.”

Haruhiro left the room and wondered if he really should go outside and get some air, but he eventually decided not to. He didn’t really feel like heading out now. If Mogzo had decided to chat with him or something, he probably wouldn’t have had to leave the room in the first place. A part of Haruhiro wished that he had taken the opportunity to talk with Mogzo.

But he couldn’t.

Why? Haruhiro thought he knew exactly why, but at the same time couldn’t completely comprehend it. He just… couldn’t confide in Mogzo, even knowing Mogzo was a really

decent human being. Haruhiro was confident that Mogzo wouldn't repeat anything they talked about to others. But the ability to keep quiet wasn't the main issue.

Haruhiro wandered into a hallway on the lodge's first floor and slumped down into a crouch, leaning his back against a wall. An ancient-looking lamp provided some light, so it wasn't pitch black, but it also wasn't enough for the hall to be considered well-lit.

It wasn't like he could talk about it even if it had been somebody else. Ranta was out of the question. He had a feeling that if he talked to Yume, the conversation would derail into something weird. And Shihoru… now that he thought about it, he'd never had any sort of serious conversation with Shihoru before. He couldn't even imagine what a private conversation with her would be like.

What about Mary? She would definitely lend him her ear. But he had a feeling that confiding in her wasn't necessarily a good thing. Part of it was that he didn't want to rely on her too much; he wanted her to think he was cool, not some weakling brat, but there was another reason too.

Because Mary had joined their party afterward, Haruhiro got the feeling that Mary sometimes felt like she owed them a debt and was always looking for ways to contribute in order to pay it off. Haruhiro didn't want her to think that he was capitalizing on those feelings. But maybe he was just over thinking it.

He didn't even understand why he felt so confused. So far, they had been fortunate enough to avoid most life-threatening situations. If luck hadn't been with them this entire time, they would all be dead by now. They had been extremely unlucky that Deathpatch appeared right after the fight with Mary's former companions and Haruhiro had been extremely lucky in killing him. The good and bad luck always balanced out.

Maybe he was just dissatisfied. He was constantly thinking about the team; wholeheartedly and desperately, he was always weighing his choices and considering everything, all for the sake of his companions. Yet what about the others? They were just enjoying life without a worry in the world. All they had to concern themselves with was learning new skills, buying better equipment, and becoming stronger. And though they had gotten stronger, they were still the bottom of the barrel as far as reserve force soldiers went. Just because they had killed Deathpatch, and Kemuri from the Daybreakers had bought them a round of drinks, it didn't mean that they were top class or anything.

Because it wasn't their fighting ability or skill that had defeated Deathpatch, but sheer dumb luck. And that was something Haruhiro must never forget.

Why didn't any of the others understand something that simple? It was only Haruhiro. Only Haruhiro realized that it was pure blind luck that had saved them. Was it really okay to leave things like this? Overconfidence was dangerous and led to horrible things. The others should understand that, but everyone was…

"Ugh, screw this!" he grunted, ruffling his hands through his hair.

It had become really aggravating thinking in circles like this. If everyone was fine with it, then that was good enough for him. As he started to get up, he heard some sort of sound coming from down the hallway. It was the sound of footsteps. Someone was coming his way from the direction of the entrance.

He could barely make out the shapes from the dim light of the lamp. Two people, both girls, but it didn't look like Yume and Shihoru. New arrivals, maybe? He had heard that there was a new group of reserve force rookies around. He had almost bumped into two or three of the guys at the baths, but this was the first time he saw the girls. Maybe now would be a good time to go back to his room.

Haruhiro didn't move, however. So what if they were girls? He should at least check if they were cute or not and if he got lucky, maybe they would become friends and could even get to know each other… privately. He couldn't deny that he kinda sorta had an ulterior motive of that sort, but he didn't admit it either. Well, whatever. He stayed crouched against the wall, not looking in the girls' direction but purposely keeping his gaze focused on the wall in front of him so he wouldn't look like he was just staring off into space or something.

That's what he was going for, anyway. Am I just being stupid? he wondered. The girls must be thinking that he was a weirdo or something. He could tell by the sound of their footfalls that they were approaching him cautiously.

It's okay, I'm harmless, Haruhiro said inwardly. Come closer, I'm not going to do anything, so no need to worry… But if he wasn't going to do anything, then he should have left before they approached. Things were way weirder this way, but it wasn't completely unheard of, right? It happened from time to time, right? Yes.

The two girls were passing him now—had passed him—when one of them suddenly stopped. Why did she stop? What was going on? Had they noticed that he was there?

Haruhiro looked up at them. He was right; the girl with bob-cut style hair was staring at him, wide-eyed. In fact, her eyes were so wide that it seemed as if her eyeballs would fall out at any moment. He noticed that she had dark circles under her eyes. Pouty lips and a stand-offish air about her gave Haruhiro the distinct impression that she was the hard to approach type. Yet Haruhiro found himself slightly fascinated.

And why was she staring at him so intently?

“Choco?” the other girl whispered, putting a hand on bob-cut girl’s shoulder. She was tall with short hair. “What’s the matter?”

“Um…” Haruhiro replied instead of bob-cut girl. “’Choco?’”

Choco… that name…

“Yes?” Bob-cut girl replied, tilting her head to one side.

…He was crouched in front of a large, glowing box-like object. Someone was standing next to him. Bob-girl. Choco. That was her name…

Huh? What was that just now? He couldn’t remember. He didn’t know. But…
Choco. Choco. He knew the name. Just the name? No, more than that. He remembered those eyes and the dark circles under them. Those pouty lips. He remembered her bob-cut style, short hair. He knew her.

“Um… you see…” he started, but didn’t know what to say.

What could he say? Could he ask her, Do you know me? or something like that? If she recognized him though, she would have said something already. But this didn’t feel like two people meeting again after not having seen each other for a while. She was staring at him, as if something about him had caught her attention. The same way he was staring back at her. If that was the case then…

The other girl stepped between them. “Since you’re here, that means you’re also a Crimson Moon member, right? Do you need Choco for something?”

“No,” Haruhiro replied. “It’s not that…”

“Then we’re leaving,” the other girl declared.

“Ah, okay,” Haruhiro said.

“Let’s go, Choco,” the girl prompted, and Choco replied, “Okay.”

The two of them left briskly, but before they disappeared from sight, Choco turned to look at Haruhiro. Their eyes met. But Choco quickly spun back around. Haruhiro might have made her uneasy, maybe surprised her a little. Perhaps even really surprised her.

“Choco…” Haruhiro whispered.

And if Choco could hear him, it probably would have made her feel even more ill at ease. Could she really be the same person?

“Nah,” Haruhiro told himself. “It’s gotta be a coincidence.”

Chapter 3: Talk of Unfinished Dreams

PART 1 of 2

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAKE UPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!”

“Argh!!”

What the hell!? What happened?! An accident!? Fire!? Hurricane!? Earthquake!? An… an elbow? Stupid retarded Ranta had elbowed him in the chest, smack on the breastbone, jolting him awake.

“What the hell, Ranta!?” Haruhiro raged. “Quit doing dumb shit and leave me the hell alone! I’ve had enough of your stupid antics!”

“No need to get so pissed off!” Ranta said. “You were sleeping like the dead and I had no idea when you were gonna get your ass outta bed, so I did you a favor and politely woke you up!”

“I couldn’t fall asleep last night so I was up late!” Haruhiro roared. “What’s wrong with me sleeping in!?”

“So even you admit you’re wrong!”

“How the hell did I admit that!?”

“You’re wrong to sleep like sleeping beauty when I went through all the trouble of getting the information early so I can tell you!”

“Um… Ranta…” Mogzo interjected hesitantly.

“Shut up, Mogzo!” Ranta yelled. “This is between me and Haruhiro! You stay out of it! Neither of us can move on with our lives until this problem is solved, so this is what’ll determine who’s the real man! You got that, Haruhiro!? We’ll finish it here and now!”

“Finish what!?” Haruhiro demanded.

“What do you mean, ‘what’!? That, you idiot! THAT! In other words… what was that again?”

“Like I would know!”

Haruhiro let out a heavy sigh and sat up. Above his head was the same lodge ceiling as always, and because he slept on the top bunk, the bed creaked when he moved.

“So,” Haruhiro turned reluctantly to look at Ranta. “What’s this information you’ve got?”

“It’s—!” Ranta grinned fiendishly.

The expression on Ranta's face annoyed Haruhiro to no end. How the hell Ranta could piss someone off just by grinning, Haruhiro didn't know, but it pissed him off. It must be another one of Ranta's "special" talents; the talents of the lowest of low-lives.

"Since you decided to sleep in," Ranta continued. "And Mogzo said something dumb about waiting until you were up, I got super hungry, so I went to the bakery by myself. B-A-K-E-R-Y. Got it? That cheap but good one right outside of Nishimachi, Tattan Bakery. There just happened to be a couple of Crimson Moon people hanging around and they were talking about it. So I asked what they were talking about, and… hold on! Everything's got a sequence, order, progression. Just like dating girls, yeah? Whoa, whoa, Haruhiro… it's waaaaaaay too early for you. No reason to get pissed off about it. 'Cause you're still a virgin, right? Not me! I'm the Fucking King. Fuck is my middle name. Experienced in all the positions. Got it? The grandeur of my manhood gets all the female tigers to dance in wild ecstasy for me…"

"And… how long are you going to make me listen to you spouting shit?" Haruhiro casually inquired.

"I'm not shit talking! Everything that comes out of this mouth is nothing but the truth! The facts!" Ranta exclaimed.

"Fine. And the information?"

"First, you get down from there. I don't like it when you're looking down at me, like you're high and mighty. It's ridiculously stupid."

The bunk beds weren't that high. The top bunk was just about the height of Ranta's shoulder when he was standing. And Haruhiro wasn't even standing; he was sitting up on his bunk. He didn't feel particularly good about looking down on Ranta, and it wasn't from all that high up, but it wasn't a bad feeling either.

"I'm staying right here," Haruhiro stated.

"You got a death wish or something!? Want me to kill you!?" Ranta shouted.

"You're a pain in the ass."

"What? Did you say something to me?"

“Yeah, I did. I said that you’re like a parasite. No, I’m sorry. Not ‘like’. I said you ARE a parasite.”

“Idiot! I’m not a parasite, I’m a worker bee!”

“So you’re okay with being an insect?”

“Wait, what?”

Not wanting to continue the annoying and pointless exchange, Haruhiro climbed down from his bunk and sat down on the bottom bed.

“Just get to the point already and tell me what that information is,” Haruhiro demanded.

“Quit making fun of me! I’m not some senile old retard!”

That made Mogzo chuckle, which in turn caused Ranta to grin from ear-to-ear.

“Unlike Haruhiro, Mogzo knows where I’m coming from!” Ranta said. “Mogzo can appreciate a good joke! Haruhiro sucks. He doesn’t get anything ‘cause he doesn’t have even a shred of a sense of humor!”

Haruhiro felt his thoughts becoming darker and darker but strived to keep his head clear and temper in check.

“The information, Ranta,” he prompted again.

“Hey, don’t go blaming me for your shortcomings, Haruuuuuhirooooo…”

“Ranta. The information.”

“Whoa. Here we go again. Persistent, aren’t we?”

“Goddamn it!” Haruhiro lunged at Ranta and began to choke the life out of him. “Spit it out! I’ve had enough of you so quit messing around!”

“E-enough!? W-wait… C-c-can’t… breathe… you trying to… k-kill me!? F-fine! I’ll t-tell you… Crimson Moon… directive…”

“Crimson Moon directive?” Haruhiro repeated, exchanging glances with Mogzo.

Mogzo, or rather his stomach, replied with a loud grumble, and his face turned red with embarrassment.

“S-sorry… I’m kind of hungry…” Mogzo explained.

“No need to apologize, Mogzo,” Haruhiro said. “It’s not like you can help it. Ah, there’s some bread over there. Why not have some of that?”

“That’s MY bread!” Ranta shouted. “I’m the one who bought it at Tattan’s cheap but good bakery just outside of Nishimachi! I bought it, it’s MINE, and I’m NOT sharing!!!”

Since Ranta was being such a selfish greedy-guts, Haruhiro and Mogzo decided to go into town together to grab breakfast somewhere else. Not wanting to be left out, Ranta tagged along with them, ostentatiously eating the bread he had bought while they walked and haughtily explaining the Crimson Moon directive to them.

Apparently, a directive was a set of orders given to the members of Crimson Moon’s Altana branch. At least, they were called a “set of orders”, but compliance was not enforced. It remained up to the individual members themselves whether or not to respond to the directive. However, those who were capable of carrying out the mission given but chose not to do so without a good reason tended to lose respect amongst their fellow Crimson Moon members.

That basically meant that if it was a reasonable directive, everyone was expected to just carry it out without complaining too much. And there was also another incentive for agreeing to participate in missions.

Monetary compensation.

A portion of the payment was given in advance when they signed up and the rest was paid upon successful completion of the mission. If someone were to accept the advance payment but not do the work, a monetary penalty would be applied. If it was judged that the person had acted with malicious intent, they would also be summoned to appear at Crimson Moon’s Headquarters. Failure to obey the summons would result in a bounty being placed on their heads.

Bounties were also considered directives and were placed on criminals or dishonest merchants. Some Crimson Moon members actually liked collecting this sort of prize money and made a living out of it. They were aptly called Bounty Hunters.

Compensation for taking on a directive wasn't paid in cash, but rather a thin bronze coin that served as a payment certificate of sorts. The coin could be exchanged for cash at Yorozu's or any financial institution contracted with either the regular army or Crimson Moon.

Haruhiro and Mogzo decided to stop for breakfast at a food stand in Laborer's Alley that specialized in a noodle dish called sorruz. The food stands in the area were packed with workers since early morning, and it was much livelier here at this time of day than the marketplace in the Altana's northern sector.

Sorruz was a dish with yellow-colored wheat noodles and broiled meat in a salty broth. Haruhiro didn't think it was all that good when he first tried it, but it reminded him of something faintly familiar, so he ended up coming here to eat every now and then. "Every now and then" soon became habit and in the end, he developed a fondness for the dish.

Haruhiro and Mogzo blew on the hot broth as they ate, slurping the noodles vigorously. Even as he munched on his bread, Ranta couldn't stand just watching them eat and ended up ordering himself a bowl of noodles too.

"Man, this is awesome! Soooooooooo good! Sorruz is the best!" Ranta declared.

"Quit making a scene. And your runny nose is dripping snot into your bowl," Haruhiro admonished.

"I can't help it! It's running like crazy! Haruhiro! You just don't get how good sorruz is!"

"Sorruz is really good," Mogzo agreed, working on his second order of noodles already. Or not…

"Mogzo, that couldn't be your third bowl already?" Haruhiro asked.

"W-well… yes," Mogzo admitted. "It's so good I can't help it…"

"Damn Mogzo!" Ranta exclaimed. "You're a worthy rival, alright! But I'm not gonna lose!" He turned to the middle-aged cook. "Hey mister! Another order of sorruz!"

"Coming right up!" the cook confirmed.

“Heh,” Haruhiro grunted, taking his time bringing the noodles to his mouth with the wooden fork. Yeah, it was good, but he couldn’t stuff himself full this early in the morning. His stomach couldn’t take it.

“But you know, Mogzo,” Ranta continued. “Good as this is, couldn’t we make it ourselves if we tried?”

PART 2 of 2

“Err…” Mogzo hesitated. “Uh… y-yes, I suppose we could… maybe? But the broth is…”

“Nah, we definitely could,” Ranta insisted. “The soup’s just throwing stuff in a pot and boiling it ’till it looks done and tasty. Yep, no problem!”

“I… don’t think it’s that simple…”

“Really? Doesn’t seem all that complicated… what’s in the soup anyways?”

“Umm… let’s see,” Mogzo mused. “Probably chicken stock with some pork lard and meat. Vegetables, like onions and carrots…”

“Whoa,” Ranta replied, impressed. “You’re pretty pro at this, Mogzo. I couldn’t even begin to guess.”

Haruhiro wanted to say that knowing the ingredients didn’t mean they could replicate the taste, but decided to let it go. Yeah, he didn’t need to say anything.

Mogzo lifted the bowl up to his mouth and took another sip of the broth. “Yes, and garlic too. If they added a little ginger, it might make the flavor even bolder…”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Mogzo, you can do it! Once we save up enough money, let’s open another sorruz stand!” Ranta proposed.

Mogzo laughed good-naturedly and replied, “But I’m a soldier for Crimson Moon.”

“Don’t be dumb! That doesn’t matter! If we can make enough money, it doesn’t matter what sort of work we do! Who says we gotta keep doing this hack-and-slash stuff our entire lives? We can retire someday and start second careers! Get what that means? It means… uhh… a number two career!”

“You can’t define a phrase with the same phrase,” Haruhiro sighed.

“Shut up, Haruhiro!” Ranta replied sharply. “I mean it! I’m having a super important talk with Mogzo so shut up and go away!” He turned back to Mogzo. “So, Mogzo, how about it? You and me! We’ll call it ‘Sorruz Stand: Ranta & Mogzo’. We can split the profits, seventy percent for me, thirty for you—but okay fine, fine, fifty-fifty. We’ll start trying to figure out the recipe now so that everything will be ready to go afterwards! What do you say!?”

“A shop, huh…” Mogzo’s expression was thoughtful as if he didn’t think it was a bad idea at all. “That might be nice. Seems more enjoyable than fighting, too. I’ll think about it.”

“Right! You do that! Way to think positive, Mogzo!” Ranta said. “Let’s get rich! Wildly rich! We can even start up a chain! Ten shops in Altana and then seventeen hundred stores throughout Grimgar! If it’s you and me, we can do it! Eventually!”

Ranta practically inhaled the rest of his soup then exhaled deeply in satisfaction. Then he continued, “Anyways, about this directive thing. You guys ready to hear it!? Ready to hear what I got to say!? Are you!? Really? You guys really ready!? Because once you hear it, I won’t take no for an answer, got it!?”

“Ranta, you’re already beyond excessively loud and annoying so just say it,” Haruhiro said.

“Haaaaaaaruhiroooooooo… you’re one to talk ‘cause you’re a hundred times louder and more annoying than me! No, wait! A thousand times! Ten-thousand times! No, five billion times more annoying! Just admit it, dumbass!”

“Okay, sure.”

“Say okay sure a hundred times!”

“Okay sure a hundred times.”

“Hey! Quit treating me like an idiot! I see what you did there! ‘Cause I can outsmart you any day! Bow down to Lord Ranta!”

“At least Mogzo’s getting a laugh out of this…” Haruhiro sighed.

“S-sorry… I just thought that just now was pretty funny…” Mogzo said.

“Mogggggzoooooo! ‘Just now’? What do you mean by ‘just now’? I’m always funny! I’m always awesome! I’m the Comedian King Rantaman! If you doubt my one outta one hundred comedic genius, future business partner or not, I’ll kick your ass!”

“I don’t think one in one hundred is all that rare,” Haruhiro quipped.

“Hey! Haruhiro!” Ranta shouted.

“What are you shouting for?” Haruhiro asked. “It’s kinda irritating.”

“I meant one outta a hundred thousand! Not a hundred! Got it!?”

“Okay, sure,” Haruhiro said. “Now talk about the directive. We haven’t gotten anywhere on that topic yet.”

“AND WHOSE FAULT IS THAT!?” Ranta yelled. “YOURS!!!”

“Why are you so pissed? I’m the one who should be pissed off at you.”

“‘Cause it’s my turn to be pissed!”

“Whatever. Just tell us about the directive.”

“Hahaha! Wait ‘till you hear what I gotta say, you guys are gonna flip your shit!” Ranta suddenly stood up, twisted his arms around each other and fashioned his fingers on both hands in the shape of a… snake? Or something resembling one. “This, guys! THIS!”

“I don’t get it. You’re gonna have to give me more than that.”

“It’s a twin-headed snake! Get it!?” Ranta made his right-hand snake head say hello to his left-hand snake head. “The offensive to retake Capomorti Fortress and Steelbone Stronghold, codenamed ‘Operation Twin-Headed Snake’! The directive is apparently aimed at covering up something about the operation. Signups for the Steelbone front is already over, but that was meant for highly experienced warriors anyway. If we participate, we’ll be part of the forces going to Capomorti. The compensation is twenty silvers in advance with eighty more after the completion of the mission. That’s one whole gold! And entire gold! One per person! Awesome, ain’t it!?”

Mogzo’s eyes went wide even as his jaw dropped.

“A gold…” Haruhiro breathed.

It was no small amount to him either. Haruhiro suddenly remembered the time right after they had lost Manato. Renji had given them a gold coin saying, “My condolences. Take it.” And he also recalled his surprise at Renji causally tossing around such a huge amount.

“If Capomorti Fortress,” Ranta sat down again and pointed to a spot on the table. “Is around here… or is here better? Maybe here instead…”

“Does it really matter where?” Haruhiro asked.

“Okay, whatever. It’s about four miles north of Altana and occupied by orcs. Four miles is like nothing, right? Super close. So of course Altana’s attacked it a number of times and managed to drive the orcs out too. But no matter how many times we attack and win, we’re never able to keep hold of it for long. The orcs always take it back. You know why?”

“Uh…” Mogzo crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head a little. “Not enough… patience? Or something like that?”

“Of course… NOT! No way! The correct answer is… here.” Ranta pointed with the index finger of his other hand to a different spot near the edge of the table. “Steelbone Stronghold. It’s about twenty-five miles west of Capomorti, by the side of the Great Funryuu River. If you follow the river upstream, you’ll soon enter into what remains of the Nananka Kingdom. You guys know that what means? Probably not. The Nananka Kingdom. It’s orc territory now. The entire kingdom’s been taken over by the orcs. They use ships on the river for transportation. Commodities, soldiers, you name it. Capomorti is a super small fortress, but when it gets attacked, the orcs send some sort of message upriver. Then Steelbone sends reinforcements back.”

Haruhiro’s brows furrowed in thought. “But it’s twenty-five miles away…”

“The orcs have a special type of unit called a ‘dragoon’.” Ranta said, striking a strange pose. It looked like some kind of animal… an octopus, maybe? “But they’re not dragons or anything, just huge lizard-like beasts called dragon-horses and apparently they run ridiculously fast. At top speed, it only takes them about an hour to cover the distance between Steelbone and Capomorti.”

“I see…” Mogzo smacked his right fist into his left palm. “That’s why we’re attacking both sites simultaneously this time.”

“Right on! I knew you had the brains to be my business partner!” Ranta snapped his finger, or attempted to but no sound came out. He tried several times but had to give up in the end. “Stupid dry skin.”

Haruhiro sighed. “Blaming it on dry skin, huh?”

“What do you have against me saying my own skin is bad!? You my evil mother-in-law or something!?”

“Uhh… what?”

“Quit pretending! You wanna fight me!?”

“Isn’t attacking Steelbone and Capomorti at the same time pretty much the same as declaring open war on the orcs?” Haruhiro asked instead.

“Oh, so you’re ignoring me now, eh. And didn’t you know? We humans are already in a state of war against the orcs and undead. Have been since forever ago.”

“Yeah, I got the idea, but it’s just been skirmishes here and there. Nothing really huge,” Haruhiro pointed out.

“We attack each other whenever we get the chance if that’s what you mean by skirmish. Orcs attacked Altana a while back, didn’t they?” Ranta said.

“Oh yeah… Ishh Dogrann? I think was his name. The guy Renji killed.”

“Yeah. This operation is probably partially in retaliation for that attack. At least originally. But this time, it’s not just some casual poke to annoy them, Altana’s army is serious about retaking and holding the fortress. They already failed to hold the fortress a number of times so I guess they’ve decided to stop repeating the same mistake.”

Ranta laughed haughtily as if he was some sort of master strategist, schooled in the military practices of Altana’s regular army. The more Ranta explained though, the more it seemed like open war to Haruhiro.

“Sounds like a pretty dangerous move. It’s not just Crimson Moon that’ll be attacking the fortress, right?” Haruhiro asked.

“Nah. Of course the regular army will be there too. They’re the main force; we reserve force members are just supporting them. Are you retarded or something Haruhiro? Use your head a little. Quit looking sleepy all the time and wake up, Haru-Heroine.”

“Quit making fun of my looks or I’ll backstab you. And what the hell is a Haru-Heroine?”

“You just don’t get my jokes, do you, Haru-Helium.”

“Ranta, I swear I’m gonna…”

“Um…” Mogzo interrupted. “How many? I mean… how many people are participating in the operation?”

“How many?” Ranta stroked his chin. “Let’s see… about five or six hundred from the regular army plus a hundred to a hundred fifty from Crimson Moon for Capomorti. The fighting looks like it’s going to be tougher at Steelbone so I heard that Souma’s Daybreakers, the Red Devils, Dak’s Berserkers, Taiman Max’s Iron Knuckles, and Shinohara’s Orion clans will all be over there. Crazy, ain’t it? It’s almost like they’re saying small fry aren’t needed there because we’d just get in the way and die.”

Why Ranta just had to add that last bit of information even though it was completely superfluous, Haruhiro could guess. Ranta was thinking that the tough fight was going to be at Steelbone, while Capomorti would be taken down with ease. He probably even thought that maybe Capomorti would surrender as soon as Altana’s army and Crimson Moon marched up to the gates.

“Anyways!” Ranta had his arms twisted together again and was making his snake head hands snap at each other. “An entire gold! It’s decided then! We’re gonna do it! Let’s go get ourselves signed up right now! There’s only three more days before the deadline so gotta strike while the iron’s hot or some phrase like that. Whatever! Let’s head over to headquarters!”

“H-hold on…” Mogzo beat Haruhiro to it. “Shouldn’t we at least ask the others?”

“Whaaaaaaaat!? WHY!? Who cares about them? About that? The convo’s gonna be, ‘We gonna do it?’ ‘Yeah, let’s do it’ ‘Okay go’ and everyone’s gonna agree so no worries! They’re just girls, too!”

“No, you can’t just assume that,” Haruhiro said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Let’s get everyone together tonight and talk it over. Besides, we’ve still got plenty of time before the deadline.”

Ranta frowned, exhaling noisily through his nose. “Fiiine. Whatever.”

The next time he says inconsiderate things like that, I’m going to reply by punching him in the face, Haruhiro decided.

Chapter 4: To Not Get Swept Along

After a day of work in the Siren Mines, selling their loot at the marketplace, and eating dinner, everybody was now gathered at Sherry's Tavern.

"I'm gonna have beer, the manly drink for men!" declared Ranta.

"T-then, uh, me too…" Mogzo followed suit.

"Mead for me," said Haruhiro.

"Same," said Mary.

"Yume'll have a lemonade! It's bubbly n' fun n' great!" Yume giggled.

"I'll have that as well," Shihoru said.

Their order arrived in no time at all and Ranta raised his cup, even though no one had asked him to do the toast. "Everyone's here? You guys ready? Alright! Cheers!!!"

Everyone responded with variations of "cheers," clanked their beverage vessels together, and drank. Ranta and Mogzo gulped their beers; Mogzo simply because he was thirsty, Ranta because he didn't want to be outdone by Mogzo. Haruhiro, sipping his sweet and slightly sour mead, didn't understand why Ranta had to be so contrary. Why did that kid always have to make everything into a competition?

"Ha! I win!" Ranta shouted, slamming the empty ceramic cup onto the table. He'd better have been prepared to pay for that if it broke. "Take that Mogzo! I win, you lose! Wahahahahaha!"

"Oh… okay," Mogzo agreed. Unable to finish the entire contents of his own cup, he placed it back down on the table. "That's pretty amazing, Ranta, downing it all in one go."

"Damn straight! I'm the MAN! You said it all, Mogzo! That's why you're my future business, venture, entrepreneur partner!"

Yume blinked, uncomprehending. "Entree pre-noir partner, hm?"

“It’s en-tre-pre-neur, Yume,” Haruhiro piped in. “What would an entree pre-noir partner be anyways?”

Shihoru made a strange half giggle, half coughing sound and when Haruhiro looked, her face was bright red, and she had both hands over her mouth and was staring down at the ground.

“Something the matter, Shihoru?” Haruhiro asked.

“No… nothing… nothing in particular…” Shihoru replied.

“Shihoru,” Ranta smirked at her in an exceedingly irritating manner. “You were imagining something weird just now, weren’t you?”

“W-weird?” Shihoru repeated. “What do you mean?”

“You’re asking me?” Ranta scoffed. “You’re the fully-loaded, wild delusions wagon.”

“W-wagon…? That’s not…”

“Yeah, an entire wagon. So don’t ask me ‘cause I’m not nearly as flooded with wild delusions as you are…”

“I’m not flooded!” Shihoru protested.

“Quit spoutin’ lies, Ranta!” Yume hugged Shihoru protectively. “Shihoru ain’t a wild wagon and she ain’t fully delusional!”

“Um… I don’t think that’s quite what he said…” Mary pointed out in a whisper.

“Huh? You mean Yume’s uncorrect again!?” Yume asked.

Ranta sneered at her. “You’re getting everything wrong! Listening to you is starting to mess with my head so just quit talking, okay? Just shut up!”

“Nuh-uh! Yume doesn’t wanna!” Yume cried.

“You don’t have the right to say no!” Ranta shot back.

“Yume has the right to state Yume’s opinions!”

“Who said anything about opinions!?”

“You did, stupid Ranta!”

“I was talking about the right to say no! Right. To. Say. No. Got it!? THE right to say no!”

“Yume knows that!”

“No you didn’t! You didn’t hear what I said at all! You deaf as a doorbell or something!?”

“Ranta…” Haruhiro interjected. “It’s not doorbell. Are you dumb as a doornail or something?”

“Oh…” Though it appeared that Ranta noticed his mistake, he wasn’t going to back off just because of something minor like that. He shrugged his shoulders petulantly and said instead, “Annnnnnd here we go again. There HE goes again, Lord Party Leader jumping down people’s throats because of some teensy-weensy mistake! And doing it in some I’m-Mister-Clever-Smartass way! You’ve got a shit personality, Haruhiro!”

“Like you’re one to talk,” Haruhiro said mildly.

“If you don’t want to hear it from me, then quit making me say it. So watch your mouth, idiot!”

“Hey, Mogzo,” Haruhiro turned to Mogzo instead. “Just a bit of advice. You’re definitely better off not making that little lump of fecal matter your future business partner. Your sorruz shop will never make it.”

“Haha…” Mogzo laughed it off dryly, expression uneasy.

“Sorruz shop?” Mary asked, tilting her head slightly.

Haruhiro started giving everyone a brief explanation about the conversation between Ranta and Mogzo at the sorruz stand. “And Ranta suggested to Mogzo that when they save up enough money, they could quit Crimson Moon and open up a sorruz shop,” he finished.

“Hm…” Yume pondered softly. “Sorruz is that ramen-like noodle soup, right?”

“Ramen…” Haruhiro echoed and for the briefest of moments, a salty, almost-remembered taste sprang to mind.

Ranta crossed his arms over his chest. “Ramen…”

“Ramen…” Shihoru touched a finger to her lips.

Mogzo leaned further over the table. “Ramen…”

“What is…” Mary started, expression troubled. “What is it? This ‘ramen’?”

“Oh, it’s…” Yume’s eyes darted this way then that way. “Ramen’s that… umm… it’s good. It’s a, uhh… that. The thing. Huh? What was Yume talking about again?”

Haruhiro scratched his head. “I forgot…”

“Ramen. We were talking about ramen,” Mogzo said firmly, unusually forceful. “We… we probably all know it. Yes, sorruz is very much like ramen. When I first tried it, I had a feeling it tasted like something I knew. It tastes like ramen. I couldn’t remember then, but I do now. I loved ramen. Ranta…”

“Huh?” Ranta said, startled. “What?”

“Let’s… let’s do it,” Mogzo replied. “Start a shop.”

“Oh?”

“But I don’t want it to be sorruz,” Mogzo continued. “I want to make it a ramen shop. While we save up money, we can keep experimenting with the flavor. And once we’ve got it right, let’s do it. Let’s open a shop.”

“A ramen shop…” A smile spread on Ranta’s face and for once, it wasn’t one of his aggravating, snarky smirks. He put a hand on Mogzo’s shoulder, squeezing tight. “Yeah! You can be the chef and I’ll manage the finances and everything else! I’ll make it a huge success for sure!”

“Right!” Mogzo agreed.

Haruhiro wanted to say that although it was all good and well that Mogzo was the chef, Ranta only put himself in charge of the finances because he didn’t want to contribute any money to the venture himself. But Mogzo seemed so excited by the idea that Haruhiro didn’t want to put a damper on his feelings by saying anything negative. No need for him to be a wet blanket, after all. Besides, plans like that were still in the distant future, so far away that it probably wasn’t worth seriously thinking about at the moment.

Nobody even knows what things are going to be like a year from now, Haruhiro thought to say, but kept that to himself, too. He wasn't about tell them to quit dreaming or say anything cold and insensitive like that. Besides, he didn't think it was a bad thing for them to dream of the future.

In fact, Haruhiro was just a bit jealous of their ability to dream, because he couldn't think any further into the future than tomorrow, or perhaps three days at best. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't… because there was a very big decision that had to be made within the next three days.

"Guys…" Haruhiro said. "There's something we've got to talk about, and since everyone's here…"

He gave them the details of the Crimson Moon directive and when he was finished, Ranta leapt up from his seat and shot a fist into the air.

"OF COURSE we're gonna do it!" Ranta exclaimed. "No need to even think about it! We get a gold for participating! A HUNDRED silvers! We gotta do it! No choice but to do it! We're gonna do it!"

"Hmm…" Shihoru's eyes were on the floor. It was apparent she was not excited at all about the prospect. Yep, that was Shihoru for you.

What about Mary though? What did she think? Her gaze was downwards too and she had a finger on her chin as if deep in thought, but she gave no indication of which way her vote would swing. Maybe it meant that she would just go with the majority vote. Perhaps she was just trying to be considerate of everyone else's opinions. Haruhiro had pretty much predicted she would react like that.

"For Yume," Yume said, puffing her cheeks out slightly and letting her gaze drift diagonally towards the ceiling. "Either way is fine."

"Really?" Haruhiro asked, incredulous.

"Hm? What do you mean?" Yume replied, confused.

"Nah, nevermind…" Haruhiro said.

He had predicted that Yume would be totally against participating because Ranta was all for it. That was the way Yume's vote usually worked, but not this time, it seemed. But

why? Haruhiro wanted to ask her, but he had a feeling that, as the leader, it would be childish to do something that would most likely exacerbate Ranta and Yume's animosity towards each other.

There was nothing he could do to fix Ranta's personality. Ranta was their companion, after all, and there was no such thing as going through life always getting along with everyone else.

But wait, then that would mean that Haruhiro was a no, Ranta was a yes, Shihoru was a kinda-sorta no, and Mary and Yume were on the fence. That left only…

Mogzo spoke up, expression unusually solemn. "I think…"

Suddenly Haruhiro had a bad feeling about what Mogzo was going to say next… and he was right.

"I want to give it a shot," Mogzo finished.

"Mogzooooooooo!!!" Ranta stuck out his hand towards Mogzo. "Gimme a high five!"

"W-what?" Mogzo blinked.

"C'mon! Just get over here and high five!"

"Ah… okay." Mogzo hesitantly reached out with his own hand and touched his palm to Ranta's.

"That's right! YESSSSSS!" Ranta said, then smacked his forearm then elbow against Mogzo's forearm and elbow until finally Ranta was practically hugging him. "Hell yeah! You're the man, Mogzo! THE MAN! My future business partner rocks! We're also frontline tanks and brothers in arms! Damn right! We're like twins! You think so too, right Mogzo!?"

"Er… um… sure? Haha… okay?" Mogzo replied.

"Hahaha! Awesome! Hey, Haruhiro!"

"What now?" Haruhiro sighed.

"Majority wins!" Ranta wrapped an arm around Mogzo's shoulders. He eyed Haruhiro like a carnivore stalking its prey and licked his lips. "It's decided!"

“Uh…” Haruhiro started.

Whoa… whoa whoa whoa! Slow down there… Just hold on one fricking second. Damn it, this wasn’t good. At this rate, everything was going to go to hell in a…

If Mogzo was a yes, then he and Ranta would make two yeses. Haruhiro and Shihoru (most likely) would be two noes. Mary’s and Yume’s votes were currently unknown. Haruhiro was fairly sure that if it came down to a tiebreaker, he could get Yume on his side. However, he wasn’t a hundred percent certain. Not anymore. Mogzo’s surprise siding with Ranta had shaken Haruhiro’s confidence in his own predictions.

“Hmm…” Haruhiro pondered, then glanced at Mary’s and Yume’s expressions.

He couldn’t discern what they were thinking at all. Which way would they vote? Both of them yes? Both of them no? He had no idea anymore.

“Let’s decide tomorrow,” Haruhiro suddenly declared.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAT!?” Ranta glared at him wide-eyed. “Are you fucking retarded or something!? What the hell!? Why tomorrow, moron!? We can decide today so why put it off!?”

“What’s the rush?” Haruhiro said. “It’s fine. We’ve still got plenty of time before the signup deadline. Let’s take a day and think about it. Then we can vote again.”

“I think that would be wise,” Mary raised her hand in Haruhiro’s support.

Gods, Mary is a goddess, Haruhiro thought. At times like this, Mary seemed like a radiant, brilliant, shining light from the heavens. Actually, that’s the way she always looked…

“Good idea,” Yume said, flopping down on the table. She was drinking lemonade, but was giving a decent impression of being drunk. “I agree with Mary. Tomorrow is good.”

“A-agreed,” Shihoru gave a single vigorous nod. “I also think that’s a good idea.”

Mogzo didn’t object. “Yes, no need to rush.”

“You guys…” Ranta couldn’t find the words to finish his sentence but that was perfectly fine with Haruhiro.

It looked like he was going to be able to stall this one for now. He let out a small sigh of relief and looked around the tavern. All the regulars were around so that meant a good number of Crimson Moon members mixed in with the townsfolk. And among them might be a good number of parties who had already responded to the directive and decided to participate in Operation Twin-Headed Snake. Maybe he could get more information by asking them.

“I hate information collecting…” Haruhiro sighed.

He just wasn’t good at approaching people he didn’t know and talking to them. But he also knew that now wasn’t the time to let his timidity get the better of him.

Chapter 5: Just a Feeling

PART 1 of 2

I know, that's why I gave it my best shot…? Kinda sorta…

In order to get more information about the directive, Haruhiro had approached some of the veteran Crimson Moon members he often saw around the tavern and attempted asking them. It was unfortunate that none of Shinohara's reputable Orion Clan members were there tonight. Shinohara himself was kind and well-mannered, and members of his clan tended to be the same. Haruhiro knew that as long as he was mindful of his own manners, any Orion Clan member would tell him what he wanted to know to the best of their knowledge.

Other than the Orion members, the only person Haruhiro knew well enough to ask questions of him freely was the well-known, overly-cheerful Kikkawa, who had arrived in Grimgar the same time he did. Haruhiro often talked with Kikkawa at Sherry's, but as luck would have it, he wasn't here tonight either.

Haruhiro wondered where he had gone. Kikkawa had ended up joining a veteran party led by someone named Tokimune, so he got a huge head start and was now frequenting areas way beyond the ability of Haruhiro's team. In fact, Haruhiro recalled Kikkawa saying something about a place called the "Wandering Abyss" somewhere on the Kazahaya Plains being their main area of operations recently.

Haruhiro slumped down against a wall in a hallway on the first floor of the reserve force soldier lodge. Mogzo and Ranta were in their room, fast asleep. Whenever they drank, both of them tended to snore very loudly. This was one of the things, perhaps among many, that kept him up.

He had talked to a few Crimson Moon members who already accepted the directive to participate in Operation Twin-Headed Snake, and every one of them was of the opinion that taking Capomorti Fortress would be easy. When Haruhiro asked them why they were so optimistic, they said that it was because Altana had already managed to take the fortress several times in the past. And they told him that it remained ripe for the taking whenever Altana felt like capturing it.

It was only the threat of reinforcements from Steelbone Stronghold that had prevented them in the past. Even if they left the orc fortress alone, there was no way the orcs would try to mount a large-scale attack against Altana from Capomorti anyway. Incidents like Ishh Dograng's raid weren't going to topple a fortress town like Altana.

Even if, by some highly remote possibility, a large orc army managed to use Capomorti as a staging point to attack, all Altana had to do was shut its gates, hunker down, and wait out the siege. The city was well-supplied and reinforcements from the Aravakia mainland would come. The orcs were well aware of this as well, so they never sent forces to attack Altana in earnest.

Capomorti Fortress was at most an observation post the orcs used to keep an eye on the human kingdom. And, as a mere observation post, it was lightly manned and guarded. If Altana were to mount a serious offensive against it, it would fall quite easily.

Apparently, all of the above was common knowledge and no one in Crimson Moon doubted that the assault on Capomorti would succeed. They would capture the fortress again, just like they had many times before. The only uncertain factor in the overall strategy was Steelbone Stronghold. Altana had never tried to capture it before, so no one could predict the outcome. But of course, everyone was confident in their odds of winning.

Altana's regular army was committing a huge portion of their resources towards the assault on Steelbone and a large number of very strong reservist clans, including Souma's Daybreakers, were helping too. The offensive should succeed.

Every one of the Crimson Moon members Haruhiro approached thought that way, so none of them doubted that victory was assured.

Isn't it fine to participate then? Haruhiro thought.

The one gold, a full one hundred silvers compensation, was not a small sum. Haruhiro's party had been operating in the Siren Mines lately and an elder kobold's talisman sold for no less than five silvers apiece. On a really good day, they could make up to thirty silvers each after splitting their earnings, but on average, each of them ended up pocketing less than ten silvers a day.

But while their earnings were greater than before, their expenditures had become higher too. They were all eating better, they frequently visited Sherry's tavern for drinks, and they spent money on various other things as well.

It was little advertised, but apparently, in addition to the one gold—after totaling the advance and completion portions of the normal compensation—there was also a thirty-silver stipend for every whole day they spent participating in the fighting. Because of this, Haruhiro figured that the higher-ups anticipated that it would take no more than one day to take the fortress.

One gold in one day. It was a huge amount. Enormous, even. It tempted him sorely.

It was going to be an easy fight and the amount of money they would earn was appealing. Why, then, was Haruhiro so hesitant about signing up?

After they exited Sherry's, Haruhiro had considered going back to confer a little more with Mary. She had a habit of staying for another drink or two after Haruhiro and the others called it a night, so if he went back, he would have had a chance to talk to her alone. But he didn't. Why?

He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but recently he felt as if there was some sort of wall between them. He had no idea when that wall had popped up, but it was constantly there, not just when they were in the tavern. And it wasn't just with Mary either. It was a wall between him and everyone else, separating Haruhiro from the rest of his companions.

Maybe it was just a feeling, maybe he was overanalyzing it. They were a team. How was it possible for him to be on one side while they were on the other? But the reality was, the gap was there.

Everyone else was now self-assured; they had found their confidence. Haruhiro also agreed that each of them had grown stronger. They could handle anything the third stratum of the Siren Mines threw at them with ease. With the danger of Deathpatch gone, no one felt that they couldn't handle any fight they faced.

As a team, they were strong enough to take on groups of seven to eight kobolds at a time, if it came down to that. Of course, it depended on how many elders were mixed in there, but one elder could be considered the equivalent of two or three normal kobolds. Fighting three elders was about the same as taking on a group of five worker kobolds; if

they really had to, they could probably handle it—not that Haruhiro would ever want to put the team in such a risky situation.

And that was the crux of the matter.

He didn't want to take any unnecessary risks. The lives of his companions were the most important thing to him. It was the one thing that was constantly on his mind. He didn't want any deaths. He wanted to keep casualties to a minimum. If he could, he would keep the number of deaths at zero. Yes, zero was the ideal. No matter what happened, he didn't want anyone to die. But fear was always with him. The possibility that zero might become one or more terrified him during all their fights.

But none of the others felt that way. Only Haruhiro. Even fights that he knew they would win scared him. They could overestimate their own ability in a given battle, lose and die. Maybe they would go into a fight overconfident, do something weird, and pay with their lives. Maybe someone would make a slight mistake and it would end up costing someone their life. Haruhiro couldn't say that any of the above was out of the realm of possibility.

"What am I thinking…" Haruhiro whispered to himself, holding his head in his hands.

Does this mean… I don't trust my companions? Or was it just himself that he didn't trust? Was it really okay for someone like him to be the leader? Can a party with someone like him as a leader survive? Or was he over-thinking things again? It's not like they had failed in any spectacular way since he became the leader… it was just the possibility of failure that he was afraid of; the possibility that if they messed up, someone could be permanently crippled, or even end up dead.

What the hell. Had that possibility never occurred to any of the others? If so, didn't it mean that they were taking everything way too lightly? Or maybe they were entirely too optimistic.

No, Haruhiro knew that, in the end, it came down to one fact: None of the others was the leader. They could be carefree because they didn't bear the burden of responsibility.

Haruhiro heaved a deep sigh. This train of thought was starting to annoy him, though he felt that he'd been riding it often, lately. I should just care less, he thought. And not think about it too deeply. Let the majority vote make the decision of whether or not

they would respond to the directive. If the team wanted to participate, then that was that.

“But…” Haruhiro said out loud, shaking his head. It wasn’t right. He couldn’t just neglect his duty as leader…

Suddenly, Haruhiro heard someone let out a small gasp a little way down the corridor, along with the sound of footsteps. The footsteps stopped and Haruhiro figured that seeing his crouched form in the middle of the hallway must have surprised whoever had come. Maybe they thought he was some wierdo lying in ambush or something.

When Haruhiro looked up, he saw a girl with a bob-cut hair style standing with her toes pointed in towards each other, looking nervous.

“Um…” Haruhiro let both his hands fall to his sides, after which the girl resumed walking towards him.

Her approach wasn’t scared or timid, but still cautiously slow. Haruhiro figured that she probably intended to pass him without a word. Of course that was what she was going to do. What was she doing out here in the first place though? It was late enough that everyone should have gone to bed, and Haruhiro hadn’t thought that anyone else would still be awake.

He had to admit though, that perhaps a small part of him had been hoping that he would bump into her again. Okay, maybe a large part of him. They ran into each other here once before, so maybe they would again. He would be lying if he told himself he wasn’t thinking that.

At this time of night though, he was hardly expecting it to actually happen. He wasn’t supposed to see her here. And she was supposed to walk past him now without a word. But she didn’t. She stopped.

After what Haruhiro thought was a moment’s hesitation, she suddenly bowed her head slightly.

“Hey,” she said in a brusque, haughty tone.

Depending on the personality of the person that sort of tone was directed at, some might even think that she was trying to pick a fight. Haruhiro wasn’t perturbed, though.

She had chosen to stop and greet him even though she could have just walked past without a word, after all.

Though he was looking at her, she refused to meet his gaze. It looked like her better judgment was telling her that she should leave immediately, but another part of her wanted to stay, so she was currently trying to decide between the two. Seriously, just go?Haruhiro thought. He wanted her to walk off, but at the same time, he wanted to strike up a conversation with her, even though he had no idea what they would talk about.

He couldn't think of anything to say. Nothing that even resembled the thing called "words" came to mind.

"Heh… heheh…" Since words wouldn't come he resorted to chuckling instead, which elicited a sigh from the girl. She started to leave.

"Wait."

"What?" she demanded, stopping.

"Err, nothing…" Haruhiro said.

Whoa. What was he going to do now? He had asked her to wait without thinking and now his mind had gone blank. Completely white. No, that was a lie. It wasn't white, but maybe a sort of blue.

"Uh, what… do you mean by what? Just what? Yeah… nothing… I guess…" Haruhiro blabbered.

"I see," she replied.

"Yeah," he answered.

"Bye."

"Hold on…"

"What?" she demanded again.

"Huh?" he asked.

"WHAT?"

“Uh… what? What’s what…? Umm… I mean…” he said.

Crap. There’s no way she wouldn’t think that he was some weirdo on drugs or something by now. Maybe he should apologize? Was this a good time for an apology? Would that be weird too? Too sudden, maybe. Crap. Crap crap crap.

The girl gave a small snicker, but quickly covered her mouth with her sleeve. She was… laughing?

“Weirdo,” she said, the bottom half of her face still hidden behind her sleeve.

“Am I? Ahh… maybe,” Haruhiro replied.

“Weirdo. And freak,” she clarified.

“No way!” Haruhiro protested.

“Yes way.”

“You serious? No way…”

“What’re you doing here then?” she asked, glancing left then right.

“I’m, uh… er… I’m not doing anything weird. I just… had some stuff on my mind. Like a normal person,” Haruhiro explained. Even though he hadn’t said anything funny, the girl seemed like she was about to laugh again but was doing her best to contain herself. “What are you doing out here, Choco?”

“We’re friends now or something?” Choco said. “Mind your own business.”

“S-sorry, I was just…”

But the question came so naturally that it almost felt like a friend casually asking another friend. Haruhiro couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t make things even more awkward than they already were. But the truth was, he did feel a sort of familiarity about her.

Choco narrowed her eyes at him. “So it’s your hobby to get close to every girl you meet? You don’t seem like that kind of guy though…”

“No way,” Haruhiro denied. “What you see is what you get. I don’t chase after girls, so I guess we’re not friends.”

“It’s fine.”

“What?”

“If we were friends,” Choco stated.

“Really…” Haruhiro replied, doubtful.

“Yeah. I get the feeling that… nevermind.”

PART 2 of 2

“Get the feeling what? I want to know,” Haruhiro pressed.

“I can’t say it.”

“Really? Fine then.”

“Okay,” Choco agreed.

“No, it’s not okay! Tell me even if you can’t tell me!” Haruhiro said.

“Chowderhead,” Choco replied.

Haruhiro’s eyes went wide and he felt his pulse suddenly speed up. What was that just now? Chowderhead. Choco’s words… he had heard it before. Or he had a feeling he had. He had a feeling that it wasn’t just some common, everyday word. Or at least it wasn’t a word he had heard before.

No, that wasn’t right. He had heard it before.

“Choco…” Haruhiro started.

“What?”

“You don’t remember, do you? Your life before coming here.”

“No, I don’t.”

“I don’t either,” he said. “I don’t remember my family or my friends.”

“Same.”

“So then… for example, I might think that I met the others in my party for the first time after arriving here, but that might not be true, right?”

“So you’re saying that you might have known them from before?” Choco asked.

“I’m saying that the possibility is there,” Haruhiro corrected.

“Yeah, true. Then maybe we knew—” her gaze fell on him for the briefest of moments before she looked away again. “—each other.”

Haruhiro took a deep breath before saying, “It’s… possible.”

“But…” Choco began.

“Yeah, I know…” Haruhiro agreed.

“It doesn’t mean anything if we can’t remember it.”

“Wait, you can’t just—” Haruhiro stopped.

He intended to say, You can’t just dismiss it like that, but he realized that she was right. It didn’t matter what had happened between them or what their relationship was in the past if neither of them could recall it. They could have been friends, family, even lovers, but if they couldn’t remember, then they were nothing to each other now.

“By the way, I don’t think I ever asked you your name,” Choco said.

“My name?” Haruhiro repeated.

He felt like someone had just punched him in the gut. She doesn’t even remember my name… Then he realized, of course she wouldn’t. They’ve only just met. Maybe it was a coincidence after all… It was a simple coincidence that he had known another girl named Choco before he arrived in Grimgar. The Choco who was standing in front of him now might share her name, but she was not the person he knew.

The way he seemed to recall having heard the words “chowderhead” before too, that was just a feeling. Only his imagination.

“My name’s Haruhiro,” he finally replied.

“Haruhiro…” Choco repeated, her eyes narrowing slightly. Again her gaze flicked to Haruhiro then away once more. “Hm. How about I call you ‘Hiro’ then?”

Haruhiro didn't reply immediately.

Strange. This was just too strange. He felt almost moved to tears and he had no idea why. Yume and Mary called him 'Haru,' and that was how everyone usually shortened his name. But he had a feeling that he had been called 'Hiro' before. By someone. At some time.

"Sure," Haruhiro finally managed. "That's fine."

"Fine," Choco said. She bent down towards him, scrutinizing him closely. "You okay?"

"Huh?" Haruhiro rubbed his eyes with a finger. "I'm fine. Why?"

Choco didn't seem to believe him. Haruhiro stood up and stretched.

"I should get some sleep," he finally said. "It's really late. What are you doing up anyways?"

"Taking a walk," she replied.

"Couldn't sleep?"

"Yeah. It happens. Sometimes."

Then maybe we'll meet again here. Sometimes. It didn't matter if neither of them could remember their pasts. What matters now is what happens from here on out. The Choco standing in front of him now was slightly sullen, unfriendly, and hard to approach. She had large eyes that resembled those of a small animal—full of caution and avoided the gazes of other people. However, on the occasion that her eyes did meet his, it made his pulse quicken.

This was his type of girl. Probably. Or at least he was rather interested. Wasn't that good enough of a reason?

"Choco, are you a Thief?" Haruhiro asked.

Choco hesitated for a second before asking, "How did you know?"

"From your clothes. I'm a Thief too."

"Yeah, you look the part."

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You look like a weakling,” she clarified.

“Well, that might be true,” Haruhiro replied hesitantly. “I’m not strong, so that’s why I joined the Thieves Guild. Wait, you think all Thieves are weaklings? Then why did you join?”

“No particular reason.”

“You just happened to end up on the front steps of the Thieves Guild complex?” It was a rhetorical question.

Choco replied anyway with, “Something like that.”

“What’s your trade name?”

“Trade name? You mean the one that Thieves call each other?”

“Yeah. We’re both Thieves Guild members, so…”

Choco was silent for a moment. “I kinda don’t want to tell you.”

“Well, it’s not like I really like mine either,” Haruhiro admitted.

“My master just gave it to me without even asking my opinion, so…” Choco said.

“Okay, then how about we tell each other at the same time?”

“At the same time?”

“Yeah, I’ll count to three and we’ll both say it at the same time.”

“Fine,” she agreed.

Haruhiro counted, “One, two, THREE.”

“Cheeky Cat,” said Choco.

“Old Cat,” said Haruhiro.

They stared at each other.

“Pfft,” Choco was the first to break the silence with a small snort.

“W-what?” demanded Haruhiro.

“C’mon… ‘Old Cat’? Are you serious?”

“Yeah, I know. I was told it was because my eyes make me look sleepy all the time so I look like some old geezer,” Haruhiro explained.

“Yeah well, mine probably came from the way I glare at people…” Choco said.

“Just the way you glare? I get the feeling it’s your mouth as much as your eyes.”

“Maybe.”

“So we’re both cats,” Haruhiro pointed out.

“Crazy coincidence,” Choco said.

“Yeah, I know,” Haruhiro agreed.

Was it really just a coincidence though? Of course it was. What else could it be?

“Does your mentor happen to be Master Barbara?”

“Who? Never heard of her.”

“I guess not. Master Barbara is a member of the Thieves Guild. She’s also a mentor.”

“A woman?”

“Your mentor is a man then?” Haruhiro guessed.

“Yeah. He’s scary,” Choco said.

“Master Barbara is terrifying too, even if she’s a woman.”

“Then why don’t you just quit?”

“From what I hear, the other guilds are just as tough.”

“No easy roads, huh.”

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

“I hate this ‘work your butt off’ kind of thing,” Choco remarked.

“I think an easy life is the best life too,” Haruhiro said.

“Too much work otherwise?”

“Yeah. I’m always thinking ‘This is waaaaay too much trouble and I don’t want to bother’ right off the bat with everything.”

“Same.”

“I see.”

“Hiro,” Choco said.

“Yes?” Haruhiro replied.

“Is your party also going to participate in the directive?”

“Directive…”

The question took Haruhiro completely by surprise. It felt as if he had been hit in the chest with a blunt object.

“Also?” Haruhiro asked. “You mean your party is going to fight at Capomorti? In the offensive?”

“It wasn’t my idea and I don’t really want to do it. It sounds really dangerous,” Choco sighed. The breath of air made her front bangs puff out. “But yeah, we’re signed up.”

Chapter 6: Outcome of the Vote

“Alright, majority rule.”

It was the following night. After the usual day of work, they were once more gathered around a table at the back of Sherry’s tavern. Drinks were ordered and delivered to the table, but no one had made a move to take their respective cups as of yet. Haruhiro glanced at his companions one by one.

Ranta was leaning back in his chair; arms crossed over his chest, pompous look on his face. Mogzo’s expression was solemn, but his nervousness was apparent. Shihoru’s gaze was glued to the floor while Yume seemed to silently plead, Can we get this over with already? Mary was her usual cool and collected self.

Haruhiro took a deep breath. “The question is whether or not we sign up to participate in Operation Twin-Headed Snake. Those for participating, raise your hand.”

“ME! I SAY YES!” Both of Ranta’s hands shot straight up into the air.

Mogzo’s followed a little more tentatively. Yume raised her hand slightly, then lowered it again, then raised and lowered it again. Mary remained still, as if frozen in place. When Haruhiro started to lift his hand up, Shihoru followed suit, just like he thought she would. She looked from her own hand to Haruhiro’s and then back to her own again.

“Ho…” Yume breathed in a strange tone.

“Hm…” Mary’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Huh?” Mogzo blinked several times and tilted his head to one side.

“What the…” Ranta jumped out of his seat, looking from raised hand to raised hand as he counted. “One, two, three, four, five… FIVE!?”

“Uh, Ranta…” Haruhiro sighed. “You can’t count both your hands.”

“What!? No I didn’t!” Ranta denied. “No way, I’m not that retarded! Oh wait… oops. Yeah, I did. So, uh… four. That’s still the majority.”

“Yeah. I guess it’s decided then,” Haruhiro said. “We’ll sign up to participate.”

“Uh…” Ranta started to say.

“What? Majority wins, so what’s the problem?” Haruhiro asked.

“Er… no problem—wait, hell yeah there’s a problem! Haruhiro, what the hell!? You want to participate now? Why the sudden change of head!?”

“Change of heart, Ranta,” Haruhiro corrected. “The right way to say it is change of heart.”

“Whatever! Shut up, Haruhiro! No one cares about that!” Ranta ranted. “There’s no way a big spineless chicken like you could say yes so what’re you up to? Spit it out, Haruhiro! No, wait! I got it! I know exactly what you’re scheming! You figured that you’d lose the vote if you said no, so you decided not to go against everyone else and changed your vote to a yes! I’m right, aren’t I? ‘Cuz that’s something you’d totally do!”

Ranta slapped Haruhiro several times on the back so hard that the sound echoed. What the hell. Quit that shit already… Haruhiro raged silently as his anger started to grow. Why did Ranta have to do such goddamn annoying things all the time? Because Ranta was Ranta, that’s why.

“Quit making assumptions about me,” Haruhiro replied, knocking Ranta’s arm away. “I wasn’t thinking that at all. Besides, if you didn’t have my vote then you wouldn’t have gotten your majority.”

“Quit getting caught up in tiny details!” Ranta shot back. “What are you, a magnifying glass or something?”

“Magnifying glasses can’t vote.”

“SEE WHAT I MEAN!? Tiny details!!!”

“And you’re so brash that you look at everything way too broadly,” Haruhiro said.

“I’m the King of Broad! I’m the Vassal of the Broad King! Broad-armed, broad-minded, and broad-hearted!” Ranta proclaimed.

“The correct term is ‘big-hearted’, Ranta,” Mary pointed out icily.

“Err…” Ranta croaked, falling silent for a brief moment before recovering with, “Haruhiro you still haven’t answered my question! Why are you agreeing!? HACK IT UP AND SHIT IT OUT!”

“You’ve got such a dirty mouth, Ranta,” Yume frowned.

“His entire existence is dirty,” Shihoru added, regarding Ranta as if he was something that just crawled out of a sewage pipe.

Entire existence? Whoa. That was pretty harsh. But Haruhiro doubted that Ranta would be affected in any way, so… maybe he should just let it pass. He had to admire the thickness of Ranta’s skin, though. If it were any other guy being told that by a girl… their feelings would be hurt pretty badly.

“Actually, I want to know too,” Mogzo said, taking a sip of his beer. “Haruhiro, why? I thought you were against participating because you were worried that we might end up getting ourselves killed. I mean, it’s natural that you’d be hesitant because you’re the leader…”

“Ha! A shitty leader too!” Ranta scoffed, gulping his beer then laughing.

“N-no way! Haruhiro’s been doing his best for us!” Mogzo protested.

“That’s right!” Yume agreed. “Like Mogzo said, Haru’s doin’ a darn good job!”

“I think so too,” Shihoru said.

“Same,” said Mary.

“What the hell!?” Ranta exclaimed. “Is today ‘Let’s-Carpet-Bomb-Ranta’ day or something? Well it ain’t gonna work so bring it on!”

Haruhiro put a hand over his mouth, trying to contain his rising elation. Damn… god damn it… He never thought that the others regarded him so highly. Except Ranta, that is. But Ranta’s entire existence was an exception.

Now wasn’t the time to get excited though, so Haruhiro cleared his throat and said, “There’s lots of reasons…”

For one, he was worried about Choco. He had never seen Choco’s party in action, but he was certain that they weren’t an all-star, ridiculously strong rookie team like Renji’s. If they were, then they would have already made a reputation for themselves, and Haruhiro would have heard the talk.

So the party Choco was in wasn’t particularly strong, and they were less experienced than Haruhiro’s team, and yet they had signed themselves up to fight orcs at Capomorti. It was just too reckless. Haruhiro was certain that they were in over their heads.

Haruhiro knew that he wouldn't necessarily be able to protect Choco even if his team participated. They were not in the same party, after all, but if he was at least in her general vicinity then maybe there was a chance that he could help her if she got in too deep.

But he couldn't tell the others any of this. Of course there was no way he could tell his companions that it was the reason he voted yes. Besides, the possibility of being able to aid Choco was just a bonus. Haruhiro had made his decision based on what he thought was best for his team.

"First of all," Haruhiro continued. "The money. The one gold in one day payment we get for participating is huge. And if the fighting goes for two days, then it's thirty silvers on top of that. Also, there's several other bonuses being offered, right Ranta?"

"Yeah," Ranta shrugged as if it was no big deal to him. He was probably acting nonchalant in order to look cool again, but as usual, he was failing. "There's bounties being offered for the orc officers. The commander of the garrison and his subordinates and stuff."

"It's not like we need to force ourselves to go after those targets," Haruhiro said, placing a hand on the table's surface. "But that's the thing, see?"

"Huh?" Yume frowned and tilted her head at him. "What's the thing?"

"We get paid the hundred silver just for signing up," Haruhiro explained. "It doesn't matter how useful we are in the fighting. We get a hundred silvers just for being there. We don't have to force ourselves to do any of the tough fighting if we think we're in over our heads."

"You're a spineless coward, Haruhiro!" Ranta yelled, expression disgusted. "You're already running away with your tail between your legs!"

"Say what you want," Haruhiro replied. "I don't care."

"You're chicken shit, Haruhiro!"

"Okay, sure."

"You're a big pussy!"

"Yes, yes."

“And your stick’s pathetically tiny!”

“What does that have to do with anything!?” Haruhiro yelled.

“But Haru doesn’t use a stick…” Yume said, puffing one side of her cheek out and tilting her head slightly.

“Um, Yume… I don’t think he meant that sort of stick,” Shihoru whispered.

Haruhiro was a little curious to find out exactly how Shihoru intended to explain it to Yume, but instead interrupted, “Anyways…”

His change of heart was something that he had spent a lot of time thinking about. In the end, he came to the conclusion that news of Choco’s party participating in Operation Twin-Headed Snake was no more than an opportunity for him to rethink his position. It didn’t have any influence on his final decision, which he had made after a prolonged internal debate.

“Everyone’s well-being at the end of a fight is more important than doing flashy things and showing off,” Haruhiro continued. “Or at least that’s what I think. But this isn’t an easy job where we can get away with never taking any risks. We’ve got to gain more experience, make ourselves stronger while finding a way to survive. It’s said that rookies aren’t considered real warriors until they’ve killed an orc, so sooner or later, a time will come when we’re going to have to fight orcs. If that’s the case, wouldn’t you guys rather do it during a large-scale operation where we’ll have help from other Crimson Moon members? All the factors look really favorable.”

“Ah…” Shihoru said in understanding.

“Oh.” Yume’s eyes went wide in sudden comprehension as well.

Mogzo stared openly at him while Mary listened quietly but intently.

Ranta suddenly started chuckling villainously, which soon turned into full-fledged laughter. “Haruhiro! You’re fucking pathetic! You’re the most spineless sissy I’ve ever met! How can you even live with yourself, eh?”

“I always wondered the same about a douchebag jerk like yourself,” Haruhiro retorted.

“Jerk? How am I a jerk?” Ranta asked. “You’re the coward—I’m just telling it like it is.”

Haruhiro decided at that moment, if the line were to appear when he was standing behind Ranta, he would [BACKSTAB] the shit out of the little prick. So for now, patience. Yes. Patience, patience, patience. Good. The more he talked back at Ranta, the more stubborn the other would become so it was best to let it go.

“Besides, even if it was blind luck, we’re the party that killed Deathpatch,” Haruhiro said instead. “And now the Capomorti opportunity got dropped in our laps so… It may be a stretch, but it feels like it’s meant to be.”

“WHOA!” Mogzo jumped up in surprise. Haruhiro was equally surprised to see someone as big as Mogzo make such a sudden motion. “I get it now! Morti means ‘death’ in some language or something right? Death and death! I never thought of that before!”

“Wow…” Yume nodded. “Yume never thought of that neither! Deathpatch and Cappimorti do have the whole death thing in common! Death Patch always makes Yume think Cabbage Patch though…”

“Not ‘Cappimorti’ Yume, Capomorti,” Haruhiro corrected automatically as if it had become his natural role. “But at least you got the death part right… Yume, are you really against participating in Operation Twin-Headed Snake?”

“Hmm…” Yume pondered. “Well, I guess if everyone’s goin’ then Yume’ll go too. Yume’s okay with tryin’ somethin’ like that.”

“I see,” Haruhiro said. “What about you, Mary?”

Haruhiro could have sworn that Mary almost smiled just now.

“I’m fine with the majority’s decision,” Mary replied. “I’ll do my best to protect everyone.”

“M-me too!” Mogzo said, pounding his chest once with a fist. “It may not be the same as Mary, but if I do my job right, then I can protect everyone too! I’m gonna give it my all! For everyone’s sake!”

“Alright,” Ranta grinned broadly. “Everyone’s all for it so we’re gonna do it, right?”

Sometimes Haruhiro thought he envied Ranta’s ability, bordering on genius, to piss people off with nothing but that moronic smile of his. Only sometimes though. Okay, maybe not ever.

Haruhiro brought the ceramic mug of mead to his lips, took a sip and said, “It’s decided then.”

Chapter 7: Late Into Night

Time seemed to fly by after all was said and done.

They visited the Crimson Moon headquarters to sign themselves up for Operation Twin-Headed Snake and then continued to go through their daily routine, though with a good amount of restlessness. Before they realized it, the day before the start of the offensive had come.

All participants were instructed to gather early in the morning—more accurately, the simultaneous attacks on Capomorti Fortress and Steelbone Stronghold were to begin at dawn, so they were ordered to assemble at three in the morning outside Altana's north gate. The bell toll that kept track of the time only rang once every two hours after six in the evening and it wasn't like any of them owned watches.

Watches were indeed sold in the marketplace but only someone like a dwarvish craftsman was able to make such things. They were so outrageously expensive that Haruhiro's eyes almost fell out of their sockets when he saw the price tag. Luckily for them though, there was a wall clock near the entrance of the reserve soldier lodge they could use to keep track of time.

The goal was to wake up at two o'clock, or something like that. Well, as long as one person woke up, they could rouse the others, so Haruhiro figured that it would work out one way or another. In order to prepare for the early start tomorrow, they all went to sleep right after the sun had set—rather, they all climbed into their bunks and made a valiant effort.

"Damn it, I give up!" Ranta declared loudly as he flailed about on his bunk in the pitch-black room.

Ranta was always tossing and turning in his sleep, but this time Haruhiro joined him.

"I can't force myself to sleep this early," Ranta continued.

"Y-yeah," Mogzo agreed. "I like getting a lot of sleep, but this is too early, even for me."

"Let's go then!" Ranta replied loudly. "Let's BUM RUSH it!"

“Bum rush what?” Haruhiro said. “And quit being so loud. Just because you can’t sleep, doesn’t mean others aren’t trying to.”

“Er, Ranta, where are you planning to go?” Mogzo asked quizzically.

“The girls’ room o’course!” Ranta said gleefully.

“Huh?” Mogzo replied in disbelief.

Haruhiro sighed. “Don’t be dumb, Ranta. What would we even do if we went?”

“We could do THAT,” Ranta said stubbornly.

“‘That’?” Haruhiro asked.

“Of course, that!” Ranta said.

“What’s that?”

“Uhhh…” Ranta paused.

“Uh?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?” Haruhiro persisted.

“Hm.”

“‘Hm’ what?”

“What’s what?” Ranta said.

“Don’t ask me,” Haruhiro said. “You’re the one who started it. Quit saying stuff when you’ve got no idea what you want to say.”

“I’m thinking about it right now,” Ranta insisted. “I’m thinking really hard! Um… uhh… MOGZO, GO FOR IT!”

“M-m-me?” Mogzo stuttered. “Erm… uhh…”

“Hang in there, Mogzo! You can do it!” Ranta encouraged. “Just a little more!”

“Arm-wrestling?” Mogzo finally ventured.

“What!? Don’t be an idiot!” Ranta spat. “No one goes to the girls’ room to arm-wrestle! Are you a pervert or something? We’re gonna go for THAT! For, uh… BOOBS!”

“Err…” Haruhiro said.

“What, Haruhiro!?” Ranta exclaimed. “What’s that ‘er’ for? You like boobs too, don’t you? You’re a man, aren’t you? ALL MEN LOVE BOOBS!”

“How do you know what I like and don’t like?” Haruhiro challenged.

“Ah-ha… so you’re saying you hate ‘em?” Ranta shot back. “So if you got boobs shoved in your face right now, you’d just turn away!? Even if they were massive triple-D sized!?”

“Hm… I don’t think I’d just turn away,” admitted Haruhiro.

“What about you, Mogzo? You like boobs, right?” asked Ranta.

“W-well… I-I guess…? Just as much as the next guy…” replied Mogzo.

“Forget it, Mogzo,” advised Haruhiro. “We don’t have to join Ranta in his stupid conversations.”

“Oy!” Ranta shouted. “You guys admitted it so it’s decided! The male primates within us are calling, so let’s go!”

“You still haven’t told us what we’re going to do when we get there,” Haruhiro pointed out.

“We’re gonna fondle, o’course!” Ranta declared. “FONDLE AND RUB AND FONDLE SOME MORE!”

“That’s rape, Ranta,” Haruhiro said coldly.

“Nuh-uh! No one said we’re going that far!” Ranta protested. “It’s like a massage! We’re just gonna ‘massage’ their boobs! It’s no problem! We’re totally safe!”

“You’d still lose your decent human being status.”

“Okay, yeah,” Ranta admitted.

“Exactly.”

“But you know,” Ranta continued a much more serious tone. “There’s no point if it’s unwanted anyways. She’s gotta say, ‘Please Ranta, touch me here,’ or it’s weird. The girl’s gotta want you to do it, you know?”

“Ranta…” Haruhiro began. “What’s up with you all of a sudden?”

“Idiot! I’m at my most gentlemanly at times like this!” said Ranta. “Besides, you guys know right? Even Yume and Shihoru want a knight in shining armor in their lives. They’re girls after all!”

“Ah…” Mogzo nodded, as if he found himself agreeing with Ranta’s point.

Haruhiro turned onto his side. “And that’s what all girls want?”

“Hell yeah!” said Ranta. “Girls can’t resist a good romance, even if they tried. Especially secret romances where forces of nature and overprotective dads and stuff try to break them up. Yeah, uhh… okay, not a good example. Forget that. But seriously, all girls have nothing but romance on their minds all the time because they’re girls. Yume and Shihoru are thinking about it even now. They’re talking about it. Shihoru is saying ‘He’s my type of guy,’ and Yume is saying ‘I like him,‘ to each other right this moment. I know it.”

“I highly doubt it.”

“Haruhiro, you seriously don’t understand girls at all. Girls are strange creatures that don’t need to eat as long as they have love. If they happen to trip and fall, it ain’t regular falling, it’s falling in love. If they fall seven times, eight of those will be in love. That’s what girls do. So, Haruhiro. What about you?”

“Huh? What about me?” Haruhiro asked.

“Who’s the girl for you?”

“What?”

The question took Haruhiro by complete surprise. Yume’s and Shihoru’s faces suddenly appeared in his mind’s eye. Who appeared first though? He didn’t know. They kept switching places with each other, fading away then appearing again.

“Who, huh…”

“How about I take a wild guess for you?” Ranta offered. “It’s Yume, isn’t it?”

“Huh? Why do you say that?”

“I’m right, aren’t I? If it was just about looks, then it would be Mary hands down, but she’s way outta your league. Shihoru has high value boobs and I guess her face can be considered sorta cute but she’s got a pain in the ass personality and she’s immune to the usual pickup lines. The way I see it, for a guy like you with zero self-esteem who’s also indecisive as shit, an airhead like Yume’s your only bet.”

“And being cautious is a bad thing…” Haruhiro said.

“How’s it a good thing?” Ranta retorted. “It’s annoying as fuck and ain’t gonna win you points with the ladies. Quit being so wishy-washy and try saying stuff confidently for once.”

“Ranta, you know you’re unpopular with the ladies, too,” said Haruhiro. “Even if it’s for totally different reasons.”

And besides, Ranta’s guess was totally off. Haruhiro would have told Ranta that he was completely wrong, but he was under no obligation to politely correct Ranta’s flawed thinking. Besides, the line of questioning itself was moot. Haruhiro simply didn’t look at any of the girls on his team in a romantic way. At least so far… or so he thought. Maybe.

“Ha!” Ranta scoffed. “I’m bursting with gentlemanly charm. You just can’t see it because you can’t score a date with a girl to save your life. Whatever, I’ve lost interest in you Haruhiro. Mogzo! Who do you like?”

“Uh…” Mogzo hesitated. “No one in particular…?”

“No way,” Ranta said. “There’s gotta be someone. When you’ve got boys mixed with girls, there’s gotta be someone. Males sort, separate, and select available females by base instinct.”

“You make us sound like savage beasts, putting it that way,” said Mogzo.

“We’re living creatures, aren’t we?” Ranta replied. “Gotta be savage while we’re still young. What’re we gonna do if we ain’t, huh? Damn straight! So, Mogzo, who are you gonna mate with?”

“Ranta…” Haruhiro, tone warning.

“What?” Ranta said. “What do you want, Haruhiro? I’m just saying it like it is. Boys chase after girls because it’s in our nature. And that’s the truth.”

“But Ranta…” Mogzo started. “I don’t think of it like that at all.”

“Then what do you think, huh?” Ranta challenged. “Go ahead, try me. Say what you think.”

“I-it’s more like…a sort of longing that starts from admiration…” Mogzo said.

“Oh? Go on,” Ranta prompted.

“And I also think to myself, ‘She’s so beautiful’…”

“A-ha!” Ranta cut in. “It’s Mary isn’t it!? It’s her you’re chasing, isn’t it!?”

“W-what!?” Mogzo exclaimed. “R-Ranta… how did you know!? But it’s not like chasing or anything…”

“Of course I know!” Ranta said. “Mary’s the only one outta the three who’s actually hot!”

Haruhiro shook his head. “Do you do anything with that mouth of yours except insult others? You’re the rudest guy ever.”

“You’re dead wrong, Haruhiro,” Ranta answered. “I’m a guy who just says it like it is. Nothing but the truth comes out of this mouth. One look at Yume and Shihoru is enough to tell anyone that they ain’t in the ‘Hot’ category. But maybe those sleepy eyes of yours just can’t tell!”

“That joke is dead, Ranta,” Haruhiro said. “I’ve told you several times so quit it already.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Ranta brushed him off. “But Mogzo, nicely done! It wouldn’t expect any less from my business partner!”

“Heh…” Mogzo smiled hesitantly. “B-but… I really do think so. I think she’s beautiful.”

“And you know,” Ranta continued. “Mary said it before. She said she prefers you outta the three of us.”

“Ah, yeah. Actually that’s when I… I started to pay attention… I started to notice, you know?” Mogzo replied.

“Pay attention?” Haruhiro muttered to himself under his breath.

Mogzo started to notice his own… well, “desires” wasn’t exactly the right word for it, but Mogzo’s confession surprised Haruhiro nonetheless.

Ranta laughed, good-naturedly for once, and Haruhiro could tell that he was growing more excited by the second.

“Mogzo, you’re awesome!” Ranta said. “You gotta go after her! Chase, chase, chase until you’ve got her! You gotta pursue it!”

“Uh… but I don’t think I’m that kind of person,” Mogzo admitted.

“Mogzo,” Ranta said. “You’re my business partner so I’m gonna give you some advice, okay? People live a long time, but life is really short, too. You gotta do stuff while you can, otherwise you’ll end up regretting it. So that’s why you should just ask her out!”

“N-no way!” Mogzo said, shocked. “I can’t do that!”

“It’s fine! Just do it!” Ranta assured him. “Ask her out tomorrow!”

“I told you, I don’t think I can do it…” Mogzo insisted.

“You can’t because you think you can’t! If you believe you can, then you can! That’s the way it works, right Haruhiro!?”

“Uhhh…” Haruhiro replied. “I dunno… I guess so? And don’t drag me into this all of a sudden.”

“Dumbass!” Ranta spat. “You don’t support Mogzo? Friends support each other! You’re his friend, aren’t you?”

“Support?” Haruhiro repeated. “I’m not being unsupportive of him…”

“You don’t want him to be happy!?” Ranta continued.

“No, I do.”

“So that’s why it’s better if he just asks her out! He’s gotta ask her out! Do the Will-You-Date-Me Dance!”

“What the heck is that?” Haruhiro said. “The Will-You-Date-Me Dance?”

“The traditional dance you do when you ask someone out!” Ranta explained. “It has been done since the lost ages! Why? Because I decided just now! Mogzo, get dancing!”

“I won’t be able to fall asleep if I do,” Mogzo said.

“Oh. Right,” Ranta conceded. “I don’t really want to see you try to bust out any moves either. I just wanted to say it. Because I’m first-class.”

“More like third-class,” Haruhiro quipped.

“I don’t want to hear that from a fifth-class person,” Ranta shot back.

“What about you then, Ranta?” Haruhiro said instead. “You asked me and Mogzo, but you never told us who you prefer.”

“Yeah…” Mogzo agreed. “Tell us, Ranta.”

“Me? You guys talking about me?” Ranta said. “You guys really wanna know?”

“I don’t know if I really want to know,” Haruhiro admitted. “Call it morbid curiosity.”

“I-I think I want to know,” Mogzo said.

“You guys really, really want to know?” Ranta asked.

“Actually, I don’t really want to know after all,” Haruhiro replied.

“I really want to know,” Mogzo said with conviction this time.

“Well…” Ranta said. “If you guys want to know that much, then I guess…”

Although he couldn’t see in the pitch dark room, Haruhiro got the feeling that Ranta had just turned over on his bunk. Actually, Ranta made it really obvious that he had turned away from them. Did he do it on purpose? Yeah, he totally did.

“Like I would tell you, retards!” he finally said.

“What the hell, Ranta!?” exclaimed Haruhiro.

“That’s just mean, Ranta,” accused Mogzo.

Ranta laughed in response. “No one is gonna get Lord Ranta to give up his secrets so easily! But I’ve got both of yours now!”

“Not fair!” Haruhiro said.

“Yeah! It’s completely unfair if you don’t tell us,” Mogzo chimed in.

“If you guys really want to know, then get over here and try making me tell you!” Ranta said. “But you won’t be able to no matter what!”

“Yeah we can,” Haruhiro said darkly.

“I’ll twist your arm off if I have to!” Mogzo declared.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Ranta shouted. “Mogzo—OW THAT HURTS! Guys, wait a—ARGHHHHHHHHH!!!”

Chapter 8: Meat Shield

The sky was still dark but the vicinity just outside Altana's northern gate was lively and boisterous. The division assigned to the attack on Capomorti Fortress was called the Azure Snake Brigade. The soldiers from the regular army consisted of five hundred Warriors, a hundred Paladins, a hundred Hunters, and around seventy Priests. They were led by Brigadier General Ren Waters. Thirty-seven Crimson Moon parties were assigned to the Azure Snake Brigade as a detached brigade, totaling a hundred and ninety seven reservists under Commander Bri, short for Brittany.

Others were present too, including townsfolk who came to see the brigade off and curious onlookers, as well as with opportunistic merchants attempting to sell their wares. There must have been over a thousand people gathered; no wonder the area was full of clamor and noise.

On the other hand, the force being sent to Steelbone Stronghold, called the Ruby Snake Brigade, consisted of a thousand Warriors, three hundred Paladins, two hundred Dread Knights, a three-hundred member strong cavalry unit, and a healer corps composed of five hundred Priests. The regulars of Ruby Snake Brigade alone were eighteen hundred men strong and were led by General Graham Lasentora himself. Add to that fifty-five Crimson Moon parties, over three hundred highly mobile reservists centering around Souma's Daybreakers, and it was a force to be reckoned with.

Altana's defense was left to the remaining members of the regular army under the command of Brigadier General Ian Latti. Haruhiro had heard of both Latti and Lasentora, but knew neither personally.

General Waters had been standing near the doors of the north gate the entire time. Manly and handsomely clad in shining off-white armor, he looked like the old-fashioned, meticulous sort. While he didn't seem like a bad person to Haruhiro, he seemed to regard the reservists with a condescending air, which made him come off as just a bit arrogant. Emblazed on his armor was the hexagonal sigil of Luminous, the God of Light, which must have meant that he was a Paladin.

The Azure Snake Brigade ranks were formed up in a way that could be easily understood, even to those uninitiated in military matters; Paladins and Priests stood closest to General Waters, followed by the Warriors behind them, and finally the

Hunters. The Crimson Moon members milled about at the rear of the formation, their reservist ranks messy and disorganized compared to the neat rows of the regular military, even with officers occasionally barking at them to form up properly. Moreover, the reservists were grouped by party and everyone meandered about, and sat or stood as they wished.

The faint-hearted part of Haruhiro wondered if behaving so casually at a time like this was really okay, but no one else seemed to be worried about it. Reservists were irregulars and a separately commanded division for all intents and purposes, so they were mostly left alone. The regular army soldiers must have looked at them and thought, 'We're different from that bunch of idiots standing behind us so we don't give a damn anyway.'

It wasn't like Haruhiro had any friends amongst the regulars, but having lived in Altana for a while now, he sensed the divide between the regulars and the reservists. And besides, Crimson Moon was full of foreigners and outsiders who couldn't be trusted anyways. In fact, they weren't even liked by the locals.

The exceptions were people like Souma, whose track record and reputation set him above the rest. The problem was, reservists like him were all attached to the Ruby Snake Brigade which naturally left Azure Snake Brigade with the dregs. The thought made Haruhiro, whose party was at the rock bottom of the dreg pool, want to crawl under a rock to hide.

There was one clan among them that deserved at least a passing glance, however. The Wild Angels, led by Kajiko, stood out like a sore thumb amongst the other trash-tier reservists present. The Wild Angels were an exclusively female clan, and all of them were dressed in white cloaks with a white feather affixed to their headgear, be it a helm, cap, bandana, or headband.

Not only were they all women—they wouldn't even let men come anywhere near them. If a guy tried to approach, he would be threatened loudly until he was forced to back off. All of the Wild Angel members were scary. Especially the tall, terrifyingly beautiful Kajiko, who wielded a katana-like long-sword. It was her eyes. Haruhiro swore that one look from those eyes was enough to kill. There was one other party here that gave off the same air of overwhelming formidability.

Team Renji.

Renji and his party arrived at the same time as Haruhiro, but the grandeur of Renji's presence among the reservist ranks alone was like a low rumbling echo and Haruhiro found that the sight of his towering, fully upright form was so radiant that he couldn't stand looking at the other directly for long. Slung across Renji's back was the sword that had once belonged to the orc Ishh Dogrann.

Renji's previous sword had gone to Ron, who was crouched nearby. Renji regarded the scene before him impassively, like a lord regarding his subjects while Ron stared overtly at Renji. The skin-headed Ron's presence was clearly overshadowed by Renji, but the gaze of someone who had such blatant tendencies towards violence wasn't something that everyone could simply ignore. Renji, however, seemed perfectly unperturbed.

Behind them was a very 'adult' looking Sassa, who had apparently set her sex appeal meter to overload before coming. Black-rimmed glasses boy Adachi looked as if he surely possessed genius that could shake any world to its foundations. Next to Renji was the diminutive and unbearably adorable Chibi. Just on the account of being on Team Renji, she must have possessed some sort of mind-blowing secret mascot ability hidden in that tiny frame of hers. That was exactly the kind of power Renji's existence lent to those around him.

He even seemed to have the attention of the intractable Kajiko, who had been openly staring at him for some time now. If Renji noticed, he thoroughly ignored her. For the future's sake, Haruhiro hoped that the two wouldn't become sparks that started any wildfires, but maybe he was just worrying too much. No, he was definitely worrying too much. Both the Wild Angels and Team Renji were like gods, or goddesses, compared to Haruhiro. They weren't even the same species of human being.

Haruhiro suddenly spotted Choco. He gave her a nod in greeting, which caused her to immediately drop her gaze to the ground. Haruhiro's party was lined up behind the main army, at the very back of the reservist ranks. Muster order was decided by experience and ability, so Haruhiro supposed that it was appropriate that they were at the very back. Except that Choco's party was positioned ahead of them.

Was he really okay with that? Yeah, he was.

From the looks of it, Choco's party was led by a handsome, nonchalant Warrior whose looks probably made him pretty popular with the ladies. His party was formed up around him in a circle with everyone chattering away at him, so there was probably no mistake that he was the leader. The girl with short hair who was with Choco the day Haruhiro first encountered her at the lodge was also there. Her clothing made it clear she was a Mage. They also had a male dressed in Priest's robes and two other males outfitted like Warriors. One of the Warriors was a very tall, dour and unfriendly looking fellow; the other seemed something like a bit of an oafish goof. The Oaf Warrior was making obvious passes at Choco, who seemed highly annoyed by his unwanted advances.

Quit it, already. You're pissing me off, was the first thought that came to Haruhiro's mind but he also knew that he had no right to be angry. That guy was Choco's teammate and companion, while Haruhiro on the other hand had talked to her a grand total of twice.

Next to him, Mogzo was breathing hard. Excited for the battle to come, maybe? Or just plain nervous? From the way he kept taking off his helm and putting it back on, Haruhiro guessed the latter. He patted—more like pounded—Mogzo on the back.

"What's the matter, Mogzo?" Haruhiro asked. "Nervous?"

"Yeah, a little," Mogzo admitted, then amended, "Okay, a lot."

"I don't blame you, this is a first for everyone," said Haruhiro.

"You don't seem nervous at all though," Mogzo pointed out.

"I guess I'm doing a pretty good job of hiding it then," Haruhiro replied.

Even though he wasn't perfectly calm, Haruhiro was actually not that nervous. He had hardly gotten any sleep so he was more sleepy now than anything else.

Yume made a strange giggling sound and declared, “Haru’s always stout-chested!”

“Uh… I have no idea what that means,” Haruhiro said.

“Hmm… I think she means stout-hearted,” Shihoru said, doing her best to interpret.

“Stout ‘hearted’?” Yume repeated, cocking her head to the side.

“Oh,” Haruhiro said then added, “Stout-chested means something different, Yume. At least it’s better than Ranta’s ‘broad-hearted’ though…”

“Ohhh…” Yume nodded in understanding, then raised her hand, palm out towards Haruhiro. “Broad!”

Haruhiro reached up, met her palm with his own with a smack and asked, “Broad?”

“Chested!” Yume exclaimed as she offered her other hand.

“Chested?” Haruhiro took the cue nonetheless, high-fived her with his other hand, and now they had their hands up in the air, both their palms touching the other’s.

What the heck is going on…? Haruhiro thought.

Yume then gave both his hands a firm squeeze and said, “Broad-chested!”

“Uh… right,” Haruhiro replied. “Okay?”

“It’s a salute to the broad-chested!” Yume explained.

“Huh?”

“Yume doesn’t really get it either,” she said. “It’s just instinct.”

“Instinct…” Haruhiro repeated.

For some reason, Haruhiro suddenly found himself looking in Choco’s direction again. Coincidentally, or maybe not so coincidentally, she just happened to be looking at him as well. As soon as they saw each other, Choco dropped her gaze to the ground just like before. Haruhiro had a bad feeling about this…

“Uh, Yume?” he said. “Can you let go of my hands now?”

“Oh. Right,” Yume said, as if she had forgotten. “Um, Haru? Hey, Haru?”

“Y-yes?”

“Yume noticed just now, but why are your hands so warm?”

“No idea…”

Haruhiro touched his left palm with the fingers of his right hand. Yume was right, it was pretty warm. But isn’t this normal? He didn’t know though, because it wasn’t like he noticed these sorts of things.

Mogzo had returned to nervously putting on and taking off his helm repeatedly once more. It seemed like Mogzo’s nervousness wasn’t so easily dissipated. Still, Haruhiro had a feeling that it wasn’t a good idea to just leave him in that state and was about to say something reassuring, but Mary beat him to it.

“Mogzo,” she called.

“Hrmph?” Mogzo half yelped.

Hrmph? What’s a ‘hrmph’? Mogzo’s expression was akin to that of a land animal encountering a deep sea fish for the first time.

Mary placed a hand on his shoulder and said, “Deep breaths, Mogzo.”

“D-d-deep breaths?” Mogzo asked, but did what he was told anyway, inhaling then exhaling slowly.

“Good,” Mary said. “Nice and easy now…”

“R-right,” Mogzo inhaled again, then exhaled once more.

“One more time, calmly.”

Mogzo did so, and when he exhaled a final time said, “I think I feel a little better now.”

“Breathing is normally automatic,” Mary started to explain. “So if you actually concentrate on doing it consciously, it also gives you a chance to get a grip on your emotions and the like. Whenever I can’t seem to calm down, I just stop and take a few deep breaths.”

“T-thanks, Mary,” said Mogzo. “I feel like a bundle of raw nerves…”

“That’s probably because—” Haruhiro started to say, but cut himself off.

For a moment, Haruhiro considered whether or not it would be better to stay silent. In the end though, he decided to say it anyway. Now was a good opportunity and he had been wanting to say it for a long time. Never having had the chance had started to bother him.

“That’s probably because our entire team depends on you so much,” Haruhiro continued. “It probably puts an unfair amount of pressure on you to perform.”

“A-ah… but that’s… I don’t…” Mogzo stuttered.

“But to be honest, I don’t think we can stop relying on you any time soon,” Haruhiro admitted. “Of course you’re our Warrior and our frontline tank, but it’s not just that. It’s because you’ve clearly demonstrated that you’re someone who we can depend on without fail. So have more confidence in yourself! Out of all of us, you’re the one who’s improved the most. There’s no one else here who has come further than you and we all know it.”

“Bullshit!” Ranta sprung to his feet like an angry ape. “I’m the one who’s improved the most, retard! Forget Mogzo! If Mogzo is level twenty-five then I’d be level thirty!”

“Isn’t that difference too modest for you?” Haruhiro said dryly.

“WHAT!?” Ranta exclaimed. “Uhhh… in that case… if Mogzo is level twenty-five then I’d be level fifty!”

“Raising yourself rather than lowering Mogzo, huh,” Haruhiro pointed out.

“Hell yeah! I’m a GOD among mortals!” Ranta declared loudly.

“Everyone around us is laughing at you,” Shihoru commented with a frosty, humorless smile.

“What!?” exclaimed Ranta. “Uhh… seriously…?”

“Yume thinks Mogzo’s amazin’!” said Yume. “If we didn’t have Mogzo, we’d be in real trouble. He’s like our meat shield!”

The corners of Mary’s mouth twitched ever so slightly as she repeated, “Meat shield?”

“Huh?” Yume blinked. “He can’t be a meat shield? Yume thinks the word’s just darlin’ so it was a compliment!”

“U-umm, I… but…” Mogzo shook his head then nodded immediately after. “It makes me really happy you think so. If I could, then I’d like to become a meat shield.”

“Awesome!” Ranta hugged Mogzo around the shoulders. “That’s my partner—I mean, meat shield—for you!”

“E-er… in your case, I’d rather be your business partner…” Mogzo confessed.

“Oh. Really?” Ranta asked.

Ranta’s unasked for interference earlier pissed Haruhiro off, but Mogzo seemed much calmer now so Haruhiro decided to let it slide. It was a relief because he was not exaggerating when he said that Mogzo was the axis upon which the entire party rotated. The team simply wouldn’t be able to function without him. As long as Mogzo was with them, the team could lose someone like Haruhiro, for example, and still be okay. That’s how crucial Mogzo’s presence was.

“Alright, alright,” Commander Bri clapped his hands loudly. “Everyone, attennnnntion please! Gather around me and listen up! I’m going to explain the plan of attack so quickly now, quickly! Gather up!”

Chapter 9: Briefing for Kittens

"…so that's how it is."

Bri had a bit of a cleft chin. No, not "a bit," not "slight," it was a huge, raging cleft chin that jutted out from the bottom of his face. His lips were black thanks to the black lipstick he wore and though he wasn't beastly person, that lipstick sure made him look it. His eyebrows were thick and bushy, and Haruhiro wondered if they were natural or stick-ons. His rosy red cheeks were obviously painted on with blush. In fact, his entire face was covered with a thick layer of makeup.

Leaving aside his face, he was dressed in full plate armor today, complete with a sword at his belt. His movements were, as usual, curvalicious, which was terrifying in its own right. His armor bore a hexagonal emblem, which probably made him a Paladin like General Waters.

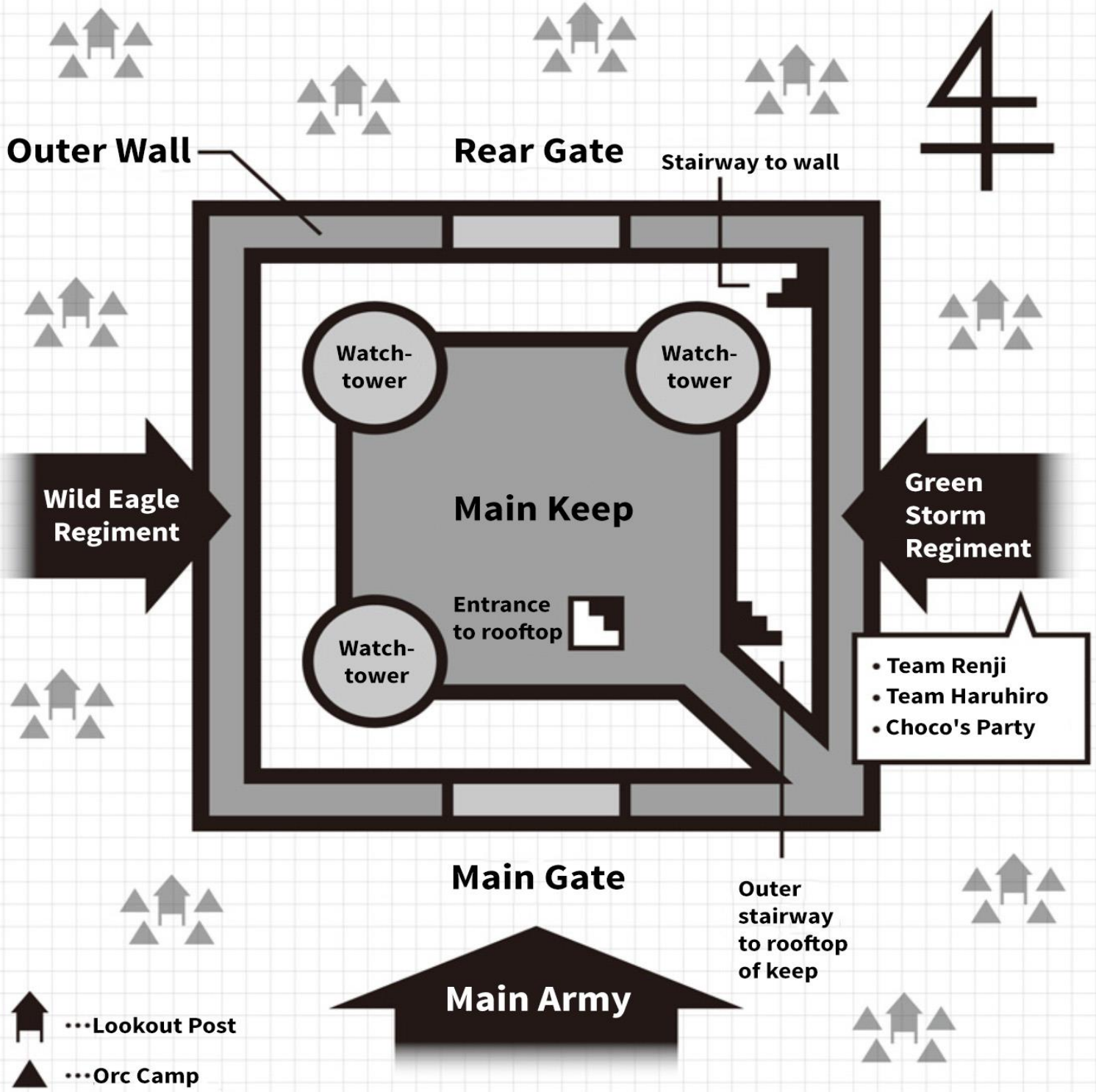
Bri regarded everyone gathered with eerie pale blue eyes and swiveled his hips around suggestively.

"…And that's the status of the immediate area around Capomorti Fortress," Bri finished. "To summarize, the fortress is surrounded by scattered orc camps centered around lookout posts. Each of these camps consists of two to five guards. I'm sure most of you already know this, but some might not, so I'm just making sure we're all on the same page.

"What we call "Capomorti Fortress" actually includes the main fortress plus the lookout posts and all the camps. Everyone still following? Any questions? No? No questions? Good. I can't be bothered to answer them anyway. Onto the main fortress then."

Bri spread a map face-up on the ground and drew a lamp over to illuminate it. It was a drawing of the main fortress area of Capomorti Fortress.

Capomorti Fortress - Map



NOTES

- The fortress is surrounded by elevated lookout posts beneath which sentry orcs are camped. Each camp consists of two to five orcs.
- The height of the protective outer walls are as follows:
  - Southern (Main Gate) approx. 20 ft.
  - Eastern and Western approx. 13 ft.
  - Northern (Rear Gate) approx. 16 ft.

“The heights of the walls surrounding the fortress are as follows,” Bri continued. “The main gate is located in the southern wall and about twenty-feet high. The eastern and western walls are both lower at around thirteen feet. Opposite of the main gate is the northern wall and rear gate, standing at more or less sixteen feet. Just inside of the northern wall is a set of outer stairs that leads to the rooftop. These stairs are the only way to reach the first floor because no other access point exists. The outer stairway is here,” Bri used the point of his scabbard to indicate a spot on the map that depicted the rooftop area.

“As you can see, the outer wall is built to connect to the main keep with an extension in the southeast corner. The outer stair to the rooftop, however, is located on the eastern side of this extension. In other words, even if we were to break through the main gate, we’d have to fight clockwise almost all the way around the entire fortress in order to reach the stairs. After that, we’d have to fight our way up the stairs to the rooftop, make our way to the rooftop entrance, and then fight our way back down to the first floor inside the main keep.

“Everyone knows why the fortress was built in such a maddeningly annoying way, right? Defense, of course! Once you reach the first floor, there are stairways to the watchtowers located on the northwest, southwest, and northeast corners of the keep. Oh yes, this is mostly information for you rookies out there, but these are three fabulously tall towers. That’s why they’re called watchtowers. The master of the fortress, the Guardian, is thought to reside in one of these three towers. Everyone got a mental image of the place now?”

Haruhiro stared at the map and bobbed his head up and down slightly. That was the place they were about to attack. He still had trouble believing it.

“Next is an overview of the attack strategy,” Bri shifted his sword to one hand and started to casually spin and twirl it around. It looked like a pretty heavy weapon, but he was handling it as if it was feather-light. “Our attack will begin at first light, but no worries! It’ll be fiiine. We’re detached from the main army so our role is to create a diversion. We move in first to attack the eastern and western walls. After we lure the enemy into diverting enough of their forces to deal with us, the main army hits the south wall and breaks through the main gate. Divide and conquer! Twenty parties will stay with me to attack the eastern wall. We’ll be called the Green Storm Regiment because of my fabulous green hair. The remaining fifteen parties will hit the western

wall under Kajiko's command. How about we call you the Wild Eagle Regiment? Pretty good name, right?"

Kajiko raised a single brow and replied, "Yeah, not bad at all."

"I've already divided the parties into their respective regiments," Bri said. "I'm only going to call out members of the Green Storm Regiment so pay attention! Ready everyone? Here we go… You, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, and… Renji."

"What," Renji said.

It wasn't a question.

"You're with me," Bri said. "Too bad, eh, Kajiko?"

"Who you talkin' to, huh?" Kajiko demanded, glaring at Bri. "You got a death wish, Brittany?"

"Nahhh, if you kill me then I can't score with any more handsome men, can I?" Bri cast a fiery, lusty glance at Renji. "Right, Renji-boy?"

Renji didn't even blink. He just met Bri's eyes with a blank, impassive expression which, in and of itself, was impressive. That look in Bri's eyes gave even Haruhiro, who had nothing to do with the exchange, goosebumps. Bri was just that terrifying.

"Drat," Bri sighed with a creepy suggestive smile, looked straight at Haruhiro, then said, "And you."

"U-uh," Haruhiro stuttered. "Yes Ma'am—I mean, Sir."

"Lastly…" Bri pointed to the leader of Choco's party. "You guys. That makes twenty. Everyone else is with Kajiko, got it?"

Everyone responded and no one made any motions of disagreement. Even if they didn't like where they had been placed, no one had the guts to bring it up with Bri. He was obscenely creepy.

"Kajiko, you've got a watch, right?" Bri asked.

"Yeah," Kajiko raised the pocket-watch dangling underneath her breasts for Bri to see.

“Oh my,” Bri said, looking as if he was going to make a comment on the object resembling a pocket-watch he was holding in his own hands but thought better of it and said instead, “Someone’s spent a pretty penny somewhere. No, no, no, this won’t do at all. You make mine look like a P-O-S.”

Kajiko snorted. “That’s because yours is a piece of shit.”

“Let’s get one thing straight,” Bri replied. “Mine is expensive because it’s old, okay? It kind of stops working randomly sometimes, but WHATEVER! As long as we’ve got watches, we can coordinate our timing. I’ll let you know what time to commence the attack later. For now, let’s talk attack plan. Once the operation kicks off, we’ll advance towards the outer walls while taking down all the orc camps along the way. Whichever parties run into orcs, kill them all, quickly. If you don’t, the orcs from other camps will come to reinforce and then you’ll get surrounded and be in real trouble. That’s Phase One.”

Mogzo nodded vigorously. He needed to calm down more and save his strength for when he really needed it, Haruhiro thought.

“Phase Two begins after we reach the walls. We’re going to attack, but the enemy will probably be raining arrows down on us the entire time. According to the scouts in our Thief unit, there are about two hundred orcs manning the walls. It’s not a huge number, don’t wet your panties! Then again, if you get hit by an arrow in an unlucky spot, it most likely means instant death. So that’s why we’ve prepared shields!”

Bri’s chin twitched to a spot along the road where a bunch of flat boards that looked like shields had been stacked.

“Everyone, be sure to pick one up before we move out,” Bri continued. “The shields are disposable, so no need to return them!”

“Super generous of you!” Ranta yelled with a grin, but Bri ignored him thoroughly.

“There aren’t any gates for us to use, so once we’re at the base of the walls, we’re going to scale them en masse with ladders. We’ve got the ladders prepared, of course, but we’re going to need people to carry them to the wall for us. The ladder-carriers’ jobs will be to get the ladders to the proper spots, assemble them, and then run them up the walls. We’ve got four ladders each for both the Green Storm and Wild Eagle Regiments.

Kajiko will be in charge of assigning the ladder-carriers for her regiment. As for my regiment the glorious ladder-carriers will be…"

Haruhiro had a bad feeling about this. He always turned out to be wrong whenever he had a good feeling about something, but his bad feeling predictions were always spot on. And this time, he hit the jackpot once again. Bri pointed to Haruhiro and then to the leader of Choco's party.

"You people will be in charge of the ladders," Bri ordered.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!?" Ranta's frown was so deep that Haruhiro thought his jaw might twist off. "What the hell!? Why do we have to be the ones with the sucky job? We gotta carry shields and now you're making us carry ladders too!? That's way too much baggage!"

Ranta… Haruhiro thought. You've sure got guts. Before Haruhiro could say anything out loud though, Bri drew his sword and put the tip to Ranta's throat.

"I'm the commander," said Bri. "If you disagree with my orders, then go home. Of course, I'll have to ask you to return the advance payment you received."

"N-no way!! I-I mean, it's not that I don't want to… I can't…" Ranta's gaze dropped to the ground as he gave a small snort. "I spent it all."

Haruhiro almost fell over with astonishment. "ALREADY!?"

"Shut up, Haruhiro!" Ranta yelled. "It's my money so I can do whatever I want with it! How I spend it is none of your business!"

"Yeah, but…"

"In that case," Bri raised his sword slightly so that it touched the underside of Ranta's chin. "Stay quiet and obey orders. The moment you disobey is the moment a bounty gets put on your head."

"B-b-bounty!?" Ranta repeated. "Uhhh, that kinda sounds like a bad thing…"

Shihoru shook her head, "Not 'kind of'."

Mary's gaze was glacial. "It's unequivocally, irrefutably, indisputably bad."

“You know,” Bri withdrew his sword and gave it a spin. “The ladder-carriers’ job is vital to the success of the assault. They need to avoid fighting to the utmost of their ability, reach the base of the wall in one piece, and when they’re there, BAM! Run the ladders up swiftly as possible. It’s a cool role for cool people.”

“Cool people,” Ranta repeated, as if tasting the word in his mouth. His mouth then twisted into an unseemly grin. “Wellllll… I guess if that’s the case, then I gotta do it. If it’s that important of a job, then no one else is cool enough to do it, right?”

“We’ll do our part too,” the oafish Warrior from Choco’s party pointed out.

“Shut up!” Ranta shot him a vicious glare. “You guys are you, I’m me. Besides, you guys are rookies that got here after us so you got no right to steal your elder’s spotlight, octopus-balls!!”

“I’m not an octopus-ball!” the other protested.

“Squid-head then!” Ranta exclaimed.

“Whatever,” the Warrior sighed. “I don’t care anymore.”

“HAHAHAHAHA! I WIN, YOU LOSE,” Ranta gloated.

The short-haired girl in Choco’s party eyed Ranta like she had just spotted a cockroach on the side of a room and said, “Scumbag jerk.”

Haruhiro buried his face in both hands, “I don’t think it can get any more embarrassing than this…”

At any rate, they were assigned to transport the four ladders so that’s what they would do. As the more experienced team, Haruhiro would have liked to take three and leave Choco’s team with only one to worry about, but it was just not possible. Two each would be the most appropriate considering that the ladders were a little over six and a half feet tall. More importantly, each one consisted of two halves. When assembled, they would stretch to over thirteen feet high. That meant there were actually eight ladders total that needed to be carried up to the base of the wall.

Haruhiro, Ranta, and Mogzo would take one each while the three girls handled the remaining one. Choco’s party consisted of four boys and two girls, so he guessed that the four boys would carry one each. Considering that each of them also had to carry

shields, Haruhiro got the feeling that they had just been assigned the most labor-intensive role of all. They might not even make it to the wall before someone dropped from fatigue.

“And now,” Bri swung his hips around and thrust his butt out straight into the air. “It’s the main army’s job to penetrate the keep and clean up all the resistance inside, but I’ll go over the enemy troop strength just in case.

“Like I said before, we estimate the fortress garrison is two hundred orcs strong. Most of them belong to the Zesshu Clan. Members of this clan dye their hair black and sport red tattoos on their faces. They’re all equipped in a similar manner with single-edge swords called Gharii, bows and arrows, fur-covered shields, and red plate armor. Just because they’re assigned to guard the outer walls doesn’t mean they’re weak, so don’t be mistaken. The orcs within the keep are a mix of various clans, so they aren’t the most unified bunch. Supposedly.”

It seemed like the hardest part of their job was going to be getting the ladders to the wall. The reservists’ role was to be a diversion. If they really did run the ladders up and start going over the wall, the enemy would probably retreat rather than only get distracted like they were supposed to. If that was the case, then the ladder-carriers really did play a critical role.

Ladder-carriers were supposed to avoid the fighting so the bottom of the barrel teams, Haruhiro’s and Choco’s, had been assigned to the role; but if they failed, the entire plan would fall apart.

“The Guardian, Zoran Zesshu, is the chief of the Zesshu Clan. Zoran-darling is so big that you’ll know him when you see him. His hair is black and gold, and I’m told that he dual-wields a pair of swords. He’s also surrounded by an honor guard of about twenty orcs at all times, and they’re all pretty nasty customers. Oh, there’s also a couple of orc shamans mixed in. They’re lightly equipped and don’t wear armor or helms so you should recognize them pretty easily. I’m sure a few of you here have never fought shamans before, so be on your guards.

“Orc shamans have psionic and insect-swarm control abilities. Their magic is also very different from ours; they don’t rely on verbal chants or physical gestures to cast spells, so their attacks can take you by total surprise. They can make a fight extremely tough so

if you encounter one, make sure you prioritize taking them down first. And umm, what else? …Oh yes, the smoke signal."

"Smokin' kills, you know…" Yume commented off-handedly.

"Yes," Bri replied. "Someone gets cut down, and blood, blood, blood everywhere, no more breathing, DEATH!? Okay, who did it!? WHO KILLED—no one said anything about killing! Dangit, now you got me all into your killing talk! Me!? Preposterous! What are you gonna do to fix this, HUH!?"

"Uh…" Yume hesitated. "Are you angry at Yume? Maybe?"

"I am NOT angry!" Bri shot back. "Do I look like some six-year-old brat throwing a tantrum to you!?"

"Oh gosh…" replied Yume. "Yume's sorry, Cap'n Bri! But Yume's lendin' you her ears properly, really!"

"Now's not the time to be lending me anything!" Bri said. "I want you to be ALL ears, got it? But I guess you don't have to be if you don't want to…"

"If not all ears then what?" Yume asked. "Yume's curious now…"

"Just drop it!" exclaimed Bri. "Shut it and let me talk! It's not that I don't like you, I do, but you're distracting me so SHUSH, ZIP IT, SHHHH!"

"Yessir…"

"Now then. The smoke signal," Bri went on. "Whenever Capomorti gets attacked en masse, the orcs send up a smoke signal to alert Steelbone Stronghold. I'm sure they'll send the signal right away like always, but this time, Steelbone's got their own troubles. Even if Capomorti requests reinforcements, they won't come. Don't be surprised by the signal and don't stop advancing.

"Hmm… I think that's about it? I've done a bunch of doom and gloom talking, but unless we screw up royally, the operation should succeed. There are bounties on the heads of the Guardian and a few of the more well-known shamans and even reservists like us can claim them. This is NOT a difficult battle. So children with no experience, don't worry. You'll be just fine."

Haruhiro was certain that Bri was looking straight at his party. He couldn't completely relax, but he did feel like this wouldn't be as hard as he initially thought. The most difficult part was probably going to be carrying the ladders and their shields the three and three-quarter mile distance to the fortress walls.

"HOWEVER," Bri said dramatically, tone menacing. "These are orcs we're dealing with. They're the ones who drove out the undead after the passing of the Deathless King and they're proud of the superiority of their strength out here on the frontier. Get careless and it won't end with some weak counterattack you can just brush off. You'll die, understood?"

Haruhiro swallowed hard. Work someone up then slap them back down. Haruhiro supposed that was just Bri's way of doing things, but it might have been pretty effective. Just when he was getting slightly overconfident about the entire thing, Bri cut him back down to size and now he was feeling physically and mentally balanced.

Bri licked his black-painted lips with a pink tongue and said, "Come along then, my kittens, summon those fighting spirits and let's be off."

Chapter 10: Graduation

PART 1 of 2

It was almost dawn. No one moved or made a sound—everyone was even trying to keep their breathing to a minimum. In the profound stillness and silence, idiot Ranta suddenly pressed his hands over his mouth and leaned forward then back again. A sneeze? What the hell? He was trying to suppress a sneeze? He had to be goddamn joking! What the heck was he thinking!?

Oh crap. Ranta was going to sneeze… he was actually going to do it. Crap. Crap, crap—just kidding. He had somehow managed to stop himself. Haruhiro breathed a small sigh of relief. They were safe.

The moment he thought that, Ranta sneezed, “ACHOO!”

He couldn’t manage to stop himself after all. Everyone’s heads suddenly snapped towards him. Rather than apologize to all the Crimson Moon members now staring at him, he made a gesture that seemed to say, ‘Quit making a big deal outta nothing!’ The idiot wasn’t afraid of anything. He had skin thicker than a brick wall.

Haruhiro poked his head out from behind a mountain-like mound of debris left from timber logging. Orc-made tents were scattered all over, one or two and sometimes even three under each lookout post. Some of the posts were manned while others were empty. There was no sign of movement. The sound of Ranta’s sneeze hadn’t caught the attention of the orcs, Haruhiro was relieved to see.

The sun hadn’t risen yet, but it was light out already. The members of Brittany’s Green Storm Regiment, assigned to assault the eastern wall, had concealed themselves behind logs, cloths, and boulders of former orc camp sites. These camps were the remains of previous attacks made by Altana on Capomorti Fortress. The camps were attacked and the orcs manning them killed, but when they had failed to hold the fortress, the camps outside were also rebuilt in slightly different locations. That left the landscape cluttered with clumps of debris that was now being used as hiding places.

But even if they were all hidden, Haruhiro had this uneasy feeling that they would be discovered anytime now. Maybe it was just his nerves. Playing the hide-and-wait game

was nerve wracking. Can't we just start and get it over with? he wished. That was almost preferable to what they were doing now.

The fortress and its three watchtowers formed a sort of corner shape and loomed in the distance like an ill omen. The fortress walls were made of stone, held together by some kind of black-colored mortar that filled every crack and crevasse. Some kind of pattern was painted on it in red—a word or maybe a letter. It was also studded with spikes made of either metal or wood, a measure clearly more for defense than decoration. The western and eastern walls were both thirteen feet high. It wasn't an impossible height, but still too tall to scale without ladders.

The orc camps were littered with animal carcasses. Some had been picked clean while others were… not so picked clean. The latter were animal heads, and had been placed on spikes or strung up on sticks and arranged in neat rows. So that's why this place was called Capomorti Fortress. It was the fortress of dead heads. Haruhiro hoped his head wouldn't end up like that.

Nah, I've got nothing to worry about… right?

Haruhiro's attention went back to the ladder he was carrying under his arm. It was heavy, but more than the weight, the damn thing was just bulky and extremely unwieldy. The square plank that he was going to need to shield him from orc arrows was slung over his back with rope. That thing was bulky and unwieldy too.

Bri suddenly stood up. He glanced at his pocket watch, nodded once, and raised his hand. Haruhiro's breath caught in his throat. It was about to begin. Bri then lowered his hand with a swift chopping motion.

"Attack!" he commanded.

Battle cries filled the air almost immediately and Haruhiro couldn't tell whether it was from their regiment or the Wild Eagles.

"Go, go, go! Take out the orc camps!" At Bri's command, the reservists streamed out of their hiding places behind the debris and charged the camps as ordered.

"C-C'mon! We're going too…" Haruhiro's voice came out more high-pitched than intended.

He hoisted the ladder under his arm and followed everyone else from the tail end of the Green Storm Regiment formation.

“O light, under the divine grace of Lord Luminous,” Mary chanted. “[LIGHT OF PROTECTION]!”

A hexagonal symbol appeared above his left wrist and he suddenly felt his body become lighter. How was everyone else doing? They were all still with him. He wanted to go at a full run, but couldn’t actually do it. The ladder was cumbersome and slowed him down a good deal. Oh, and he was extremely nervous. He had no idea what he was doing. Was Choco still okay? Where was she? Wait, now wasn’t the time to be thinking about that.

Everyone around them was amazing. They were cutting down the orcs manning the camps one after another, burning down the tents using Alev fire magic, and knocking down the lookout posts. Camps were systematically obliterated before his eyes. How far had the front line advanced? Haruhiro couldn’t see them so he had no idea. He didn’t think they had reached the eastern wall yet, but maybe he should pick up the pace in case they had? Not that going faster was possible, though.

“The smoke signal’s been lit!” exclaimed Mary.

Haruhiro turned towards her and saw that she was pointing towards something in the direction of the fortress. A thick column of smoke was billowing from the watchtower that occupied the corner position between the other two. The signal calling for reinforcements. This time though, Steelbone Stronghold was also supposed to be under attack so no reinforcements should arrive.

“There’s smoke comin’ from over yonder too!” Yume cried.

Yume was right. Several pillars of smoke were also rising from a distance in the west. What was that supposed to signify? Maybe it was one of many relay stations along the way to Steelbone. The Stronghold was twenty-five miles away so there was no way they’d be able to see smoke coming from Capomorti directly.

Wait… isn’t that two columns of smoke rising from the relay station? Haruhiro wondered. Suddenly it clicked. Smoke signals weren’t used only by Capomorti; if Steelbone got attacked it would light up a signal too. Both locations were being attacked, so both were trying to communicate to the other. That meant the Capomorti orcs would now know that they couldn’t rely on Steelbone to send reinforcements.

If they thought that reinforcements would come, they would probably attempt to hunker down and hold out until help came. But if they knew they couldn't expect reinforcements, how would their strategy change? Would they fight desperately to the death, attempting to resist to the end?

Well, Haruhiro figured that the higher-ups would have already considered that possibility. It wasn't something the rank and file needed to concern themselves over. All they had to worry about was doing the job assigned to them, which meant the ladders.

Once the other reservists had taken care of the camps, they'd run the ladders up the walls. It looked like the majority of the camps in the area had already been destroyed. Choco's party was behind them and was moving slower than his own team. Yes… we can do this! he thought for a split second before rejecting the notion. Things were never that easy.

He hadn't even completed the thought when two orcs managed to somehow slip past the other parties and came charging straight at him. No, not at him. They were going for Choco's party.

"Watch out! Two orcs coming your way!" Haruhiro shouted, trying to give the alarm.

Choco's party stopped in their tracks—wait, what!? Why were they stopping? It seemed that the members of Choco's party had no idea either.

"Oy!" one of them shouted.

"Crap!" another said simultaneously.

"The ladders!!" cried a third.

This was bad. Really bad. Everyone in Choco's party was completely panicked, running around like headless chickens. There was no way they would be able to put together a defense against the attacking orcs.

"We can't afford to lose half our ladders!" Haruhiro yelled. "We have to help them! Drop your shields and ladders for now and take out the orcs!"

"R-right!" Mogzo placed his ladder on the ground and unstrapped the shield buckled to his back.

Shihoru picked up the shield that Yume dropped and stacked it on top of her own. Mary nodded to Haruhiro and placed the ladder she carried on the ground at her feet.

“We’ll do this without magic for now!” Haruhiro said, sprinting forward.

He decided to test the strength of the orcs first. It was too early to expend magic; they still had a long fight ahead of them… probably. Team Haruhiro slipped neatly between the orcs and Choco’s disarrayed party. Mogzo attacked Orc A straightaway while Ranta set his sights on charging Orc B. The orcs were equipped with scale mail, helms that covered everything but their faces, and durable looking swords. Orc A’s yellow hair spilled out and down from his helm as did Orc B’s red hair. Both of them were green skinned.

Haruhiro winked at Yume then took up position behind Orc B’s back. Orcs were huge, not so much in stature but in bulk. They were taller than Haruhiro and not quite as tall as Mogzo, but their bodies were broad and thick. Two humans side by side could probably fit inside the skin of an orc. All considered, Haruhiro’s impression was that they were probably one size above Mogzo, and Mogzo was about six feet tall. And these orcs were probably just average. No wonder it was said that orcs were the biggest humanoids that occupied Grimgar. And they were as strong as they appeared.

Of course, Ranta was being pushed back by his opponent and using [PROPEL LEAP] repeatedly to retreat. Naturally, the orc gave chase, forcing Yume and Haruhiro to chase after it in turn. They couldn’t get into their respective positions at the flank and back of the orc.

Mogzo was having a tough time too. In fact, he was taking several hits and only his armor was preventing him from being cut down. If armor could be counted as a defensive strategy, then Haruhiro would say that Mogzo and Orc A were about evenly matched with a slight edge going towards the orc. The difference was in the orc’s raw strength and sheer bulk.

Orcs had stronger muscles than humans; it wasn’t just in their arms, it was their legs too. Even if the extra muscle density gave them more weight, they had longer endurance running over distances and they were able to jump higher. And just because they looked big and bulky didn’t mean that they were slow and dumb. Agility was also related to muscle mass, after all. Orcs had wide mouths with tusks sticking out of them and their noses looked like something that got smashed into their faces.

To humans, they were NOT attractive. Actually, they were rather hideous. But they didn't seem stupid. For example, they possessed enough intelligence to build lookout posts and design tents. The carcasses and animal heads stuck on poles made them look like savages, but they were wily enough to offer the human kingdom real opposition. And it was perfectly possible that they purposely kept their camps looking grisly and barbarous to frighten humans.

Orcs were physically superior compared to humans and intelligence-wise they were probably on par. If so, then in a simple, straightforward fight an orc would probably win against a human.

"Don't let yourselves be intimidated!" Mary called out. "We can take them if we get used to fighting against them!"

She was right. Or at least Haruhiro couldn't afford to let himself think otherwise. If he didn't believe he could win, then he would lose, even when victory was possible.

PART 2 of 2

"Mary's right!" Haruhiro exclaimed. "We're just not used to fighting orcs yet, that's all! Mogzo, you got this! You're stronger than any orc!"

With a grunt of effort, Mogzo went on the offensive. Or rather, he used the heavy-armor skill [STEEL GUARD]. He purposefully warded off Orc A's swing with his shoulder pauldron and, while the orc was reeling from the recoil of its own deflected blow, Mogzo returned the attack with his huge meat cleaver sword, The Chopper. The orc managed to block, but Mogzo's swing was powerful enough to crush through it.

Orc B saw its ally stagger backwards, and its own movements faltered for a split second. In that moment, Haruhiro's and Ranta's gazes met.

"No need to tell me!" shouted Ranta.

When Orc B stepped forward this time, Ranta didn't use [PROPEL LEAP] to retreat. Orc B's movements were slower, more hesitant than before. With a yell, Ranta leapt forward and met the orc head on. He pressed in against the orc with [EXPEL FRENZY] and then followed with [ANGER THRUST]. To Haruhiro, the combination looked well executed, but the orc managed to twist its body sideways and dodge.

It was a close call though. Probably too close for the orc's comfort; Ranta's attack missed it by a hairsbreadth.

"I know!" said Ranta. "I'm invincible!"

"Since when!?" Haruhiro shot back.

Haruhiro was finally in position directly behind the orc. The line failed to appear so he settled for [WIDOW MAKER]. Before Haruhiro could latch onto its back though, the orc sensed the attack coming and avoided it. It was a good thing Haruhiro wasn't alone.

Yume leapt in with a [SWEEPING SLASH]-[CROSS CUT] combination. The orc deflected Yume's kukri with a loud clang and moved to counterattack. Yume yelped and quickly rolled away using that pit rat dodging skill of hers. Orc B tried to pursue, but hadn't gotten the fact that he was up against a team through its thick skull.

Ranta charged in again, longsword raised high, shouting at the top of his lungs. From the way Ranta was moving, it seemed like he intended to tackle the orc. While it was distracted by Ranta, Yume got back on her feet and Haruhiro moved to get behind it again. Orc B was feeling the pressure now and clearly panicking. Another round of attacks… all they needed was another round to bring it down.

Their chance came.

"THANK YOU!" Mogzo sunk his sword into Orc A's shoulder with [RAGE CLEAVE]. The orc wasn't down, but it was completely off balance and staggering blindly. It could no longer properly wield its sword. Its defeat was only a matter of time now.

Meanwhile Orc B had become thoroughly confused. Haruhiro was directly behind it, so he couldn't see its expression but he could tell from its movements. Haruhiro stealthily closed the distance between them and with [BACKSTAB], buried his dagger into it. Even without the line Haruhiro did a decent job of getting his dagger between the scale armor and into the orc's flesh.

He didn't think the wound was fatal, but it was enough. Just as Haruhiro jumped back and out of the way, Yume came in and slashed at the orc once, twice, three times. Her kukri was shorter than a longsword, but its blade was broader. Even if it didn't cut through the orc's armor, the damage inflicted by the sheer force of the blows was significant. Orc B teetered, on the brink of collapse.

“[HATRED’S CUT]!”

Ranta’s attack came unexpectedly from outside the range of Orc B’s reach and it couldn’t react in time to block. Ranta’s sword slashed into the orc’s shoulder but glanced off its armor. Was that on purpose? Haruhiro wondered when Ranta didn’t try to cut through the sturdy scale armor but smoothly swung his sword around, aiming for the orc’s exposed face. What happened next… No way Ranta had planned it, he just got lucky, right? Ranta’s longsword sliced through the chin strap of the orc’s helm and in the same motion hooked itself under the helm to strip it completely off its head.

“Take that!” Ranta shouted.

Ranta was wearing a darkish bascinet helm and his visor was down so that it covered his face, but Haruhiro could swear that Ranta was sticking his tongue out at the orc right now. He brought his sword up and then cut—actually, it was more like struck—the orc over and over. The orc went down under the rain of blows but Ranta didn’t let up and didn’t stop pounding away at it.

By now, Mogzo had finished off Orc A with [RAGE CLEAVE]. Orc B, too, soon stopped moving. Only then did Ranta finally relent. Choco’s entire team was backing away from them, appalled. This time though, Haruhiro didn’t criticize Ranta for his savagery. It might have been gruesome to watch, but Ranta wasn’t in the wrong here. Cruel as it was, there was no stopping until the enemy was dead.

Living creatures, hung stubbornly on to life. When death came, it came quickly. But while living creatures clung to life, they fought viciously and desperately, attacking and counterattacking through injury and pain.

“Ahahaha!” Ranta laughed. “Got my Vice AND graduated from virginhood! CONGRATS TO ME!”

That was true enough. No one was injured, and Mary and Shihoru hadn’t been forced to use magic either.

“We were amazin’!” Yume jumped with glee.

“Whoa!” Ranta snickered. “For being tiny triple A cups, they sure jiggle hard when you—OW! Quit punching me!”

“Then quit sayin’ things to make Yume punch you!” Yume shot back.

Mogzo pumped his fist into the air and gave everyone a single nod. Shihoru's response was more muted but even she couldn't help smiling. Mary looked obviously relieved. Haruhiro, too, felt an inexplicable feeling welling up within him. It started from the tips of his toes and worked its way up from there, filling up his chest and filtering through all the way to the top of his head until he felt himself becoming almost intoxicated by it. It was such a good feeling, he wished that he could lose himself in it for a while.

"That was incredible…" the leader of Choco's party whispered.

"As expected of veterans," the oafish Warrior said in a manner that could be taken the wrong way depending on the listener. It seemed devoid of sarcasm to Haruhiro though.

"W-we're saved," the Priest sunk to his knees, still looking terrified.

"Whoa…" Choco's short-haired friend stood shell-shocked.

Choco herself gazed at Haruhiro, mouth slightly agape, astonished expression similar to her friend's. I could get used to this,Haruhiro thought. Then the tall Warrior went and ruined the mood.

"Whatever," he shrugged. "Everyone's killing orcs everywhere. It ain't no big deal."

"Hey!" Ranta pointed his bloody longsword in the Warrior's direction. "Quit being a frickin' wet blanket when people are trying to feel good about themselves! What are you, Wet Blanket Man!?"

"Am not! What's a 'Wet Blanket Man' supposed to be anyway?" the Warrior retorted.

"How the hell am I supposed to know!?" replied Ranta.

"You're the one who said it!"

"Shut up! Shut the hell up! Just 'cause you're tall doesn't mean—" Ranta started.

"Ranta, enough!" Haruhiro made his way back to the area where he had dropped his ladder and shield. Now wasn't the time to bicker with the obviously socially awkward Warrior. "We gotta get the ladders to the wall!"

Haruhiro quickly slung his shield behind his back and tucked his portion of the ladder back under his arm. A few of the other reservists were already at the wall. Team

Haruhiro ran as fast as they could and Choco's party followed slightly behind. All the orc camps they passed had been obliterated, their former occupants now corpses.

Suddenly Haruhiro thought that Yume was shouting something like, "Rows, rows" before he realized that she was actually crying, "Arrows! Arrows!"

Orcs were lined up at the top of the outer wall, bows and arrows at the ready. No, not just at the ready, they were firing them.

"Damn it! Shields! Everyone, get your shields up!" ordered Haruhiro.

Arrows rained from the sky. Haruhiro held his shield up like an umbrella, making it extremely difficult to also carry the ladder. There was no choice but to do it though. Although the number of arrows coming down at them wasn't overwhelming, they did come. Getting hit by one might mean death.

"Hurry up with the ladders!" the reservists already at the walls shouted angrily at them.

"We're coming!" Ranta exclaimed, gearing up to charge the wall so he could run his ladder up.

Haruhiro grabbed him before he could take off, saying, "We gotta assemble them first!"

"Oh yeah!" Ranta acknowledged.

"Mary, Yume, Shihoru!" Haruhiro called. "Cover us with the shields!"

The three of them locked shields while Haruhiro, Ranta, and Mogzo worked on the ladders under cover. In order to assemble the ladders, they had to stack the overlapping joints together then fasten them into place with nails. Haruhiro's hands were shaking, unsteady. Every time an arrow thudded into the locked shields, Shihoru gave a small yelp. Haruhiro couldn't steady his hands enough to hammer the nails in properly.

"Here, let me!" Mogzo was suddenly with him. He took the hammer from Haruhiro's hands and steadily pounded one nail after the next into place. He tested the connections by pulling then pushing on them then nodded. "Done! Let's go!"

Both the ladders were now assembled at their full thirteen feet plus length. One person could no longer carry it alone so Haruhiro and Ranta took one while Mogzo and Yume got the other. The orcs were growing desperate. The closer they got to the wall, the

heavier the arrows rained, and the harder they hit. Arrows smacked into their shields at an incredible rate.

Isn't this— Haruhiro thought frantically. We're being targeted!?

"Crap!" he shouted. "Crap, crap, crap!"

Ranta and Yume, even Mogzo was shouting now.

“Just a little further, we can do this!” someone, Haruhiro wasn’t sure who, encouraged.

Someone else said, “We’re okay! As long as we’ve got the shields, we’re okay!”

Don’t stop. Don’t stop no matter what. If he stopped for even a split second, Haruhiro knew that he wouldn’t be able to continue. They were going to get the ladder to the wall in a single attempt. There wasn’t any choice but to get them there in the first attempt. He charged on, shouting who knows what, feet tumbling and tangling beneath him as he ran as fast as possible. Finally, they set the ladders against the spike-ridden outer wall.

The Green Storm Regiment let out a wild battle cry as one cohesive unit. The air vibrated, the ground shook. It almost sounded like a victory shout and made Haruhiro feel even more elated than when they took down those two orcs. We did it! We succeeded! Look at us, we’re awesome! His head spun from the realization.

“Outta the way!” Renji shoved Haruhiro aside and started climbing the ladder.

He had no shield even though orcs armed with bows above him had him directly in their sights. The crazy brave Renji showed no fear though.

“Renji, stop!” Bri’s voice carried over the chaos of battle. “We’re not in a rush to go over the wall!”

The air vibrated, the ground shook once more. But it wasn’t them this time. Was it coming from the western wall, on the Wild Eagle Regiment’s side of the fortress? No, the voices weren’t human. The orcs were bellowing their own battle cry. Their voices rose as one, shaking heaven and earth. It had to be coming from…

“The main gate!?”

Chapter 11: Warriors of the Frontier

His name was Anthony Justin. He was a dignified and much honored Warrior attached to the Frontier Army's First Brigade, Warrior Regiment. He wasn't just some run-of-the-mill fighter though, he was skilled and masterful. Anthony led the Warrior Regiment assigned to assault the main gate of Capomorti Fortress as the regiment's illustrious captain, staking his honorable name on doing his part in Operation Twin-Headed Snake. And he and his warriors had been steadily gaining ground since the assault began.

Naturally, the most appropriate position for a Warrior of his skill and stature was at the front lines. Thus, he had been leading his courageous men in the charge upon the outer wall at the head of the main army. Deep in his heart, however, there was something about this entire situation that he deeply resented: The person named Ren Waters.

Brigadier General Ren Waters was a cowardly old man who couldn't hurt a fly. There was nothing Paladin-like about him. He was mainland-born and a spineless pansy. A real Paladin would stand at the head of the army, would be willing to risk his own life to protect his fellow soldiers. In fact, any frontier-born Paladin with any guts at all would do at least that much, but that filthy mockery of a Paladin, Waters, was different.

He had surrounded himself with a hundred other Paladins and several Priests in order to protect himself, positioned himself at the back of the main army, and then attempted to look as authoritative as possible. He was an idiot. A shameless, gutless retard, worse than garbage. He was a member of the well-known House Waters, but possessed none of the family's qualities. He should just die. Die and rot in hell.

Even if General Graham Lasentora was unavailable because he was leading the attack on Steelbone Stronghold, Brigadier General Ian Latti should have been the one to lead the formidable, peerless soldiers of the regular army in the assault on Capomorti Fortress. Latti was born and bred on the frontier and had a reputation of being a warrior amongst Warriors. Waters should have been left behind in Altana, cowering behind the city's fortifications like a newly hatched chick.

This entire time Anthony's men had been taking down the lookout posts and orc camps, braving torrents of arrows while charging the walls, and even now attempting to break down the main gate with battering rams, yet Waters was doing absolutely nothing to

contribute. All he had done was cry the order, “Move out!” at the very beginning and that was it. Even a six-year old brat could have done it.

Altana’s Frontier Army was composed mostly of soldiers who were locals of the area. They were rugged and tough, proud of their native roots, and they treated the spineless, cowardly soldiers from the mainland with contempt. Soldiers from the mainland talked big and were always quick to boast, but they couldn’t handle a sword to save their lives. They were so pathetic, they deserved every bit of the scorn and bile thrown at them.

In reality, when it was announced that Ren Waters had been assigned overall command of the Capomorti front, morale amongst the men had plummeted. It was like adding insult to injury, having been assigned to Capomorti in the first place. Everyone knew Steelbone was the main objective and no one wanted to be left with the job of attacking Capomorti, where victory was assured. As soldiers, they would do their jobs and bring the fortress down, of course… but when they won, it would count as another feather in Ren Waters’ cap. And victory was the only expected outcome.

Damn that Ren Waters. Damn him to hell. This was the power of family influence; there was nothing else to explain it because Waters certainly didn’t obtain his position through merit! Waters didn’t have to do anything to move up the ladder, he was simply elevated. That was the way these things worked.

General Graham Lasentora, the unofficial symbol of the Frontier Army, was forty-six years old this year. He was still young, but there was a strong rumor that the mainland was also after his military services. He was offered the position of High General no less than three times, all of which he had refused. Everyone believed, however, that he would eventually transfer to the mainland. There were also rumors that Ren Waters was maneuvering to take Lasentora’s position here after he left.

Three Brigadier Generals served under Lasentora. Brigadier General Ian Latti, Shithead Ren Waters, and Brigadier General Jorrud Horn, who was constantly at Lasentora’s side. Logically, the most obvious successor to Lasentora would be Horn, but the reality was, Lasentora’s and Horn’s relationship was much too close. If Lasentora went to the mainland, then there was a good chance that Horn would want to follow.

In that case, the next person in line would be Ian Latti. In terms of skill and ability, there was no doubt that he was head and shoulders above Waters, but that shithead Waters might already be using his family’s power and influence to take the title of General for

himself. It was definitely a possibility. On the other hand, shitheads were shitheads so he might want to return to the civilized mainland. Good. Hurry up and go. A shithead should go back to the world of shitheads where he belongs.

Anthony had never seen the mainland that lay on the other side of the Tenryuu Mountains. He imagined, though, that it was a land filled with dozens, even hundreds of human cities. Its rural areas, too, would have stretched as far as the eye could see, where livestock leisurely roamed the open ranges.

The wild tribes in the south remained unconquered and defiant of the authority of the Aravakia Kingdom, but they were not a major threat. On the infrequent occasions that conflict did break out, it was rare for the kingdom's soldiers to actually die in battle. In fact, the wild tribes were too preoccupied fighting each other.The Aravakia Kingdom sometimes even stepped in to mediate the inter-tribe disputes. It was almost as if Aravakia was a compassionate father and the wild tribes were its quarrelsome sons.

Industry was well-developed, the people loved arts and entertainment, and they enjoyed the favor of the God of Light, Luminous. It was a society overflowing with happiness and prosperity. Altana and the mainland shared the same currency (the coins were minted in the mainland), but something that cost one gold on the frontier was as cheap as ten silvers on the mainland. The mainland was so highly developed that anything and everything was available at the markets. Even the poor could obtain meals and clothes quite easily by begging and even the most wretched beggars on the mainland lived better than soldiers on the frontier.

Shitheads. They were all goddamn shitheads.

Did any of the mainlander shitheads think about what made it possible for them to continue living their shithead lives? The blood of soldiers like Anthony, here on the frontier, that's what. If Altana fell, then it would only be a matter of time before the earth-dragon tunnels running under the Tenryuu Mountains were discovered. Masses of invading orcs and undead would flood in. Even if there was never a full-scale invasion, the threat of one would always be there.

The mainland had built their riches and prosperity on the corpses of people like Anthony. It was like building a castle on a foundation of quicksand.

So no matter how great and wonderful the tales made the place out to be, no matter how much of a paradise it was, the mainland was still a stinking pile of fucking shit. To be completely honest, Anthony would rather invade the mainland and plunder their riches than fight the orcs and undead out here. He had the right, after all. He was the one protecting their wealth by doing his duty, and because he did his job, they were able to continue acquiring wealth. They owed their prosperity to Anthony and the other soldiers out here and it wasn't an exaggeration when Anthony said that all of the mainland's riches belonged to them.

But of course Anthony wouldn't do any such thing. It wasn't just the impracticality, it was his pride as a soldier. As much as he liked wine, women, and luxury food, he knew the domain of real men was the battlefield. Real men fought their fights here on the frontier.

"DIE REN WATERS!" Anthony shouted, making it his battle cry.

The men manning the battering ram responded as one, combining their might as they grinned and responded with shouts of, "Rot in hell Ren Waters!" or "Die shithead Waters!"

If Waters heard them from his position at the rear, it would mean trouble afterwards. But Anthony didn't give a damn. They would do their jobs because it was their duty as soldiers. Their pride as warriors was on the line.

"Three, two, one, CHARGE!" Anthony yelled, waving his sword. "Three—"

Deafening roars of rage split the air. The god damn orcs! They were jumping off the walls directly into the fray. The southern wall was more than twenty feet high. That was NOT an insignificant distance from the ground. But the orcs were fearless; they leapt off the wall without hesitation, even crushing some of the soldiers unfortunate enough to be positioned where the orcs happened to land.

Those shithead mainlander soldiers constantly tended to underestimate orcs and other enemy races, but Anthony was true frontier bred and born. He had no such bad habits. He was wary of the daring and audacity of the orcs; they were unparalleled in both physical strength and toughness. The ten—no, closer to twenty—men at the front of the formation who weren't expecting the attack from above were instantly cut down.

Actually, not down, back; they were sent flying into their fellow soldiers in the deeper ranks.

It happened in an instant. The men manning the battering ram were dead even as they stood slack-jawed at the unexpected angle of attack. These were all veteran soldiers and they weren't prone to carelessness, yet they had been cut down with ease. Anthony refused to give the orcs more opportunity to surprise them.

The front gate was still shut, so the orcs who had jumped down had no retreat. They had no option but to charge forward. They were a suicide squad and would die to the last orc. The orcs were, literally, deathly desperate. Come to think of it, Altana had launched this offensive because victory was guaranteed. They would succeed because failure was unthinkable. Everyone knew it for a fact. But the orcs never thought that they would die this way. Their will to fight was completely different and entirely inferior.

"Steady, men! Steady!" Anthony commanded.

He engaged a nearby orc, locking blades with it and looking for an opportunity to use [SPIRAL SLASH]. The orc, however, saw through him. It leaned in, not giving an inch, then sprang back and out of range.

"Surround them! We've got the numbers, surround them now!" yelled Anthony.

While some of his men obeyed at once, a large number of others hesitated, looking bewildered. They were paralyzed by indecision, unable to move even if they wanted to. Arrows descended from above again. The confusion in the ranks deepened and spread.

"We should retreat for now!" a soldier yelled.

"Don't be a fool!" Anthony exclaimed angrily, fending off an orc's slashing sword at the same time. "Our warrior's prides are on the line! This is that shithead Ren Waters' fault, but we've got no choice but to cover his sorry ass! Rise, Warriors of the Frontier! To me! To me! We're going to break down that gate!"

Chapter 12: Afterwards

PART 1 of 2

Something was clearly wrong at the southern wall, near the main gate. What was happening? Haruhiro had a really bad feeling about it. Actually, he had only bad feelings about it. Surely it meant trouble…

The Green Storm Regiment's assault on the eastern wall continued nevertheless. The orcs were fighting conservatively, concentrating only on defense. If they didn't clear the wall soon, the arrows raining down on them from above would never stop.

"We're going to take control of the parapets first!" Bri raised his sword, pointing to the top of the wall. He was not carrying a shield.

They had somehow managed to get all four ladders in place and no one on Haruhiro's team or Choco's party had been hurt. Haruhiro stuck close to the wall itself, shield raised above his head to fend off stray arrows. He couldn't see anything happening above him so he had no idea what was going on up there, but he assumed that Renji had been the first to make the climb and was raising all sorts of hell already. Thanks to that, the volume of arrows being shot at them visibly decreased.

Just as Haruhiro let out a deep breath of relief at the reprieve, someone grabbed him roughly by the scruff of the neck, making him yelp.

"Oy! Quit zoning out, Parupiro! We're going too!"

Ranta. It always had to be stupid Ranta. His grip hurt, so Haruhiro slapped Ranta's hand away, making him let go.

"That's not my name," Haruhiro snapped. "And go where?"

"Up the wall, where else?" Ranta shouted.

"No, wait—!"

"Wait, bait, straight my ass!" Ranta shot back. "LET'S GO!"

This time, Ranta grabbed Haruhiro's ear in an attempt to drag him to the nearest ladder. Haruhiro wished that kid would quit his antics and felt himself getting genuinely pissed off. He swept Ranta's legs out from under him.

"What the—!?" Ranta sprang back up to his feet even as he hit the ground. "Bastard!"

"Whoa!" exclaimed Haruhiro as Ranta curled his hand into a fist and raised it. "You're really going to start a fist fight at a time like this!?"

"Time's got nothing to do with it!" Ranta yelled.

"Of course it does! What the hell are you thinking!?"

"I'm not a man restricted to the laws of common sense! In fact, I'm gonna revolutionize logical thinking!"

"And while you're doing your revolutionizing nonsense, everyone else is already over the wall!" Haruhiro pointed out.

"WHAT!?" Ranta cried. "Seriously!?"

Even Choco's team was lined up underneath a ladder, ready to begin the climb up. Haruhiro took that as a sign that they should probably get their behinds moving as well.

"L-let's go too!" Mogzo said, his words finally spurring Haruhiro into action.

"Okay! Me and Mogzo will go first!" Haruhiro ordered. "Everyone else after us!"

"Quit being retarded!" Ranta spat, cutting in front of Haruhiro and starting his scramble up the ladder. "Me first!"

"Fine, whatever!" Haruhiro shouted after him.

He slung his shield over his back again and followed Ranta up, Yume close behind him. Mogzo and Mary were using a different ladder while Shihoru brought up the rear. The orc arrows had ceased some time ago. At the top of the wall, orcs and humans were scattered and mixed in a chaotic mess but it looked like Green Storm had the clear upper hand. There were no orcs remaining on the parapet anywhere near them.

Haruhiro could see a set of stairs leading downwards on the other side of the wall, near the northeast corner. The orcs were gathered near it, fighting to the death to prevent

the humans from reaching it while the humans, rallied around Renji and his team, assaulted relentlessly.

“Go, Renji!!” Ranta shouted.

It wasn’t like Ranta’s shout of encouragement made any difference at all, but the next moment, Renji swiftly stuck down an orc with a single stroke and viciously kicked another, sending it flying off the ramparts. With that, the orcs’ defensive line broke down entirely, inviting a thunderous cheer from all the reservists.

“Now! Charge the stairway!” commanded Bri.

Renji and Ron were the first to reach it. The orcs were massed in a tight shoulder-to-shoulder formation around it, desperately trying to prevent the humans from going down. How the heck were those two going to deal with that? Haruhiro wondered. By body slamming them, apparently.

“C’mon! Push!” Ron shouted.

No way… is the guy completely insane? The rest of Team Renji and all the other reservists in the area obeyed immediately, throwing their own weight against Renji and Ron. Everyone was shoving with all their might. What the hell… They were going to get crushed to death. And between the orcs and the reservists, Renji and Ron were going to get turned into pancakes, because the orcs were shoving back as hard as they could too.

Renji and the other reservists were pushing downwards from above, while the orcs were pushing upwards from below. The advantage was obviously on the human side, especially since Renji had taken the initiative to charge in the first place. The orcs were falling like dominos. But what about Renji and Ron?

There! They were still standing, stomping and kicking orc after orc back down the stairs even as they began their own descent.

“God damn!” Ranta said. “Renji’s awesome!”

Haruhiro admitted that he had to share the sentiment. Renji was incredible. Haruhiro could hardly believe that they had all arrived here at the same time. Haruhiro and his own team couldn’t even compare, and if they tried, it would only make them feel even lousier.

It kind of gave Haruhiro a certain amount of pride, when he thought about their shared arrival. Anyone would be proud to admit that they came in the same group as Renji. Or maybe not. It was also pathetic in a way. But that Renji… he was amazing. He was so cool. Haruhiro already knew exactly how amazing Renji was, but that didn't stop him from thinking it again now. Renji was cut from a different cloth. The gap between him and everyone else was so wide, laughing at it was the only thing Haruhiro could do.

"Don't go too far ahead!" Bri warned from the top of the parapets. "The main army hasn't broken through yet!"

Suddenly a volley of arrows flew at Bri from one of the watchtowers of the main keep. Bri deflected the ones flying at him almost lazily with his sword, without even turning to glance in the direction they were coming from. But while Bri was unharmed, some of the other reservists weren't so fortunate. Several went to their knees as they got hit.

"We can't stay here!" Haruhiro said, loud enough for the wide-eyed, slack-jawed members of Choco's party to hear. "It's probably safer down the stairwell! Let's go!"

"No need to tell me, idiot!"

Ranta. Always stupid Ranta. He always had to be mouthing back unnecessary shit. In fact, his entire existence was unnecessary. No, no… calm down, let it go… Endurance training, that was what Ranta provided. Horrible, hellish, heinous endurance training.

The watchtowers were made for defense. There were narrow, slit-like windows cut into them that the orc archers were shooting from. The reservists couldn't see the orcs, so it was hard to even determine how to time their shots. Just as Haruhiro and the others headed for the stairway, more arrows came at them. The orcs were purposely aiming for anyone who was trying to approach the stairs.

"Shields!" Haruhiro quickly unstrapped his shield form his back and brought it to bear in front of him. However, no one else followed suit. "Guys, where are your shields!?"

"Um…" Yume hesitated. "Yume thought that we wouldn't need them anymore, so Yume left it below the wall. It was heavy!"

"Me too," Shihoru admitted.

"Y-yeah, I did too," Mogzo said.

“Same,” said Ranta.

“Same here,” Mary said as well.

“Even you, Mary?” Haruhiro sighed in exasperation.

Looking around now, Haruhiro noticed that he was in the minority. Everyone in Choco’s party and almost all the other reservists were no longer carrying shields. Maybe it was because Haruhiro was a hoarder that he had instinctively held onto his. But one shield wasn’t going to help at all… Suddenly an idea came to him.

“Use the ones the orcs dropped!” Haruhiro said.

The Green Storm Regiment hadn’t made that big of a dent in the orc garrison numbers, but there were a good number of orc bodies scattered around them. Lying with the corpses was their equipment; armor, swords, and shields. The furred shields were of Zesshu Clan make.

“Gotta take what we can get!” Ranta declared as he picked up an orc shield.

The reservists around them followed suit. Everyone held their shields between their bodies and the watchtower as they ran for the stairwell. Arrows smacked into Haruhiro’s shield one after another, but none hit his person; the shield was doing its job.

PART 2 of 2

They made it part of the way down the stairs before they were forced to come to a halt, unable to advance further. In order to get inside the keep, they had to ascend a different set of stairs, the outer stairway, leading to the rooftop. The outer stairway was located in the upper half of the southeast corner of the fortress, meaning that those who came through the main entrance would be forced to circle around the entire fortress before they could reach it. But it also placed the members of the Green Storm Regiment assaulting the eastern wall closest to it.

Renji and his team were already heading there, but orcs kept pouring out of other places within the fortress. Their sheer numbers almost completely stopped even Team Renji’s advance.

“So far so good!” Bri said as he deflected arrow after arrow with his blade. “Keep it up and the others will eventually arrive!”

Is that really true? Haruhiro wondered.

“Uh-oh! Here comes trouble!” Bri shouted.

Haruhiro blinked in surprise. A large group of orcs was charging at them from the rear gate in the North. The main army was hitting the southern side while the Wild Eagle Regiment assaulted the western wall, but that left the orcs manning the northern wall completely untouched. Word that the humans had breached the eastern wall must have reached them, and now they had come to reinforce their peers.

“Shit! Renji’s gonna be caught between!” someone shouted.

“Whoever’s available, attack the reinforcements!” Bri’s order came swiftly and Crimson Moon parties responded instantly, rushing to meet the orcs from the northern wall.

Or at least they attempted to. But moving in the midst of battle wasn’t so easy. Even if they wanted to meet the orc reinforcements coming from the north, the majority of the regiment was sandwiched in the area between the stairway to the wall and the outer stairway to the roof of the keep and couldn’t reposition themselves even if they wanted to.

“We’re going too!” the leader of Choco’s party said, rushing down the last of the stairs from the wall.

The other members followed, clearly confused, each of them wearing bewildered expressions.

“No, wait—!” Haruhiro shouted.

He didn’t know whether Choco’s group was too caught up in the excitement or what, but this was way too reckless. There were more than twenty orcs in the group coming from the northern gate. A rookie group like them would never be able to take them. Haruhiro wished that they would use their brains and consider the odds against them. It was too late though, they were already gone.

“We’re just gonna stand here!?” Ranta demanded, tone taunting.

Haruhiro hesitated for several seconds. Damn it! He couldn’t just let Choco rush to her death.

“Let’s go!” Haruhiro decided.

Haruhiro leapt to the ground, and didn't even have time to recover his balance before he was attacked by the orcs. The orcs' ferocity was unbelievable. Within seconds, several of the reservists around him had fallen—been cut down. Probably dead. The next moment, the orcs had broken through their front lines.

Two, make that three orcs were headed straight for Choco's party. The leader and the two Warriors took one orc each, but it was clear they were completely out of their league. The oafish Warrior was on the defense almost immediately while the other Warrior was knocked flat on his behind before he could do much of anything. The leader, too, was being overwhelmed by his opponent and it was only a matter of time before he was finished.

Their Priest then rushed forward and attempted to strike one of the orcs with his short staff. Haruhiro already knew the attack would be ineffectual. The difference in strength was just too great. Choco and the other girl, the Mage, held tightly onto each other, trying to make themselves appear invisible. What the hell were they thinking!? They might as well be shouting at the orcs to please finish them off first.

And of course, the orcs didn't miss the opening. One of them moved to oblige the obvious death wish.

Haruhiro wanted to help them, but he was too far away.

"Oom rel eckt pram das!"

Shihoru. She had intervened when Haruhiro couldn't. A black, seaweed-like shadow elemental shot from the tip of her staff in a spiraling motion. It hit the orc, who was about to turn Choco and her friend into two bloody stains on the ground, right in the face. The elemental then seemed to shrink and started to seep into the orc's mouth and nose. The effect it had was immediate, as the orc's expression suddenly turned blank.

Some spells, such as [PHANTOM SLEEP], were easy to resist if the intended target was alert and wary but [SHADOW COMPLEX] was a little stronger. The orc was also caught completely off guard by Shihoru's spell, so it was even more effective. [SHADOW COMPLEX] first caused its victim to fall into a state of stupor, then its entire body would begin trembling, and finally, it would lose the ability to think rationally.

"[ANGER THRUST]!" Ranta leapt in, attacking it before it reached the third stage, the point of his sword aimed at the base of the orc's throat.

Haruhiro wanted to be the one to deliver the finishing blow, but Ranta beat him to it. It annoyed him, but he brushed off the irritation. Instead, he maneuvered himself behind the orc who was forcing the oafish Warrior up against the wall, where the Warrior couldn't retreat any further. He had unburdened himself of the shield earlier. Of course, the line failed to appear for him this time, too.

These orcs were different from the ones manning the camps outside the fortress. They were equipped with red painted plate mail armor that left no gaps on their backsides and was too thick for his dagger to penetrate. Rather than [BACKSTAB], he moved to put the orc in a full nelson hold, and rather than locking his hands behind the orc's neck, he thrust his blade into the gap between its helm and breastplate.

As soon as his dagger had punched completely through the orc's windpipe and arteries Haruhiro jumped off of it. The oafish Warrior then brought his longsword down hard onto the already staggering orc. The guy was fairly tall and had time to raise his sword high over his head, so his cut had a lot of force behind it. The orc fell, but the Warrior didn't stop hitting it until he had completely stopped moving.

"T-thanks…" he said to Haruhiro, completely winded and gasping for breath.

Rather than reply, Haruhiro assessed the situation around him. Another orc was going for Choco again.

"Choco! Behind you!" he shouted.

Choco leapt to the side and the orc's swing missed her by mere inches. It roared in rage or frustration, turned its sights on Haruhiro, and charged. Haruhiro knew that he couldn't take any orc head on. It simply wasn't possible. So he gathered his wits and shored up his defense, concentrating solely on the orc's movements. It was armed with a single-edged sword; Haruhiro remembered the weapon being called a Gharii.

Down its blade came, from the upper left side. He deflected it with [SWAT], using his wrist to redirect the blow. The next attack was from the upper right; [SWAT]. [SWAT], [SWAT], [SWAT]. The orc's attacks were powerful, swift. If he messed up even slightly, the fight would be over. If the orc chose to bide its time, to test Haruhiro's defenses with uncommitted attacks, then it could force Haruhiro into erring eventually.

But it was too impatient for that. Good. It raised its sword high, intending to crush through Haruhiro's defense with its next blow. [SWAT] wouldn't work this time. The orc

was putting too much force behind its attack. Instead of defending against it, Haruhiro purposely stepped into the orc's attack, twisting his body sideways. Rather than deflecting, he let the orc's Gharii slide down and off the blunt back of his dagger. It was more of a soft parry than a hard deflection.

In the same movement, he grabbed hold of the orc's arm—the [SWAT] into [ARREST] combo. Master Barbara had put this particular move on him for two straight days and he had practiced the move against her in what was practically true combat for two days. The orc's arm, however, wouldn't bend to let him complete the technique. It was too sinewy, too thick. So in a split-second decision, Haruhiro locked its elbow into place, and then swept out its feet from under it.

The orc reacted instantly. Rather than let Haruhiro take it down, it threw itself into the fall, used the extra momentum to turn it into a roll, then sprang smoothly back onto its feet. In was in that very instant—

"THANKS!"

Mogzo leapt towards it, his fatal [RAGE CLEAVE] descending from above, aimed for the top of the orc's head. There was no recovery. The blow split the orc's helm, and the head under it, clean in half down the center. Holy shit, Mogzo…

"T-thank you…" Choco whispered, staring wide-eyed, hands clasped at her chest. She stared at him in half stupefied state.

"No prob—"

Haruhiro didn't get a chance to finish his reply. He quickly grabbed Choco's arm, dragging her towards him. Another orc was coming. Mogzo stepped in again, intercepting the orc, smooth as butter. Disaster was averted for now, but quite unintentionally, Haruhiro now had Choco completely in his embrace. He quickly let her go, stepping away.

"S-sorry…" he said.

"Hiro, don't apologize," Choco replied. "You just saved me."

"Yeah but…" Haruhiro started. "Er, maybe afterwards!"

Maybe what afterwards? Haruhiro thought to himself. What was he going to do afterwards? He had no idea but he was too busy to think more about it right now.

“HAHA!” Ranta snickered loudly. “Mogzo’s bagged himself two orcs already! That’s my business partner for you!”

Ranta was using [PROPEL LEAP] unreservedly to keep the attention of one of the orcs on himself. Mogzo was furiously and relentlessly raining blows down on another. Shihoru concentrated on orcs further away, keeping them from approaching with her magic. Mary remained close to Shihoru, guarding her in case any orc went for her. Shihoru was in good hands with Mary.

Haruhiro cast his gaze on Yume. All they had to do was fight like normal; support Mogzo and Ranta, and attempt to finish enemies off as fast as possible.

“HARUHIIIIIIRO!” Ranta jump backwards using [PROPEL LEAP]. “What’s up with you and that girl!?”

“You really have time to ask me that!?” Haruhiro shot back.

“I got all the time in the—WHOA!” Ranta yelped as he was attacked again.

“Yeah, sure!” Haruhiro scoffed.

“Shut up, stupid Haruhiro!” Ranta let out a guttural shout at the orc he was engaged with. “[EXPEL FRENZY]!”

The moment he locked swords with the orc, he attempted to push off and leap away, but he didn’t manage to put much distance between him and his opponent. Meanwhile, Mogzo was suddenly fighting against two orcs at once. When Haruhiro had checked only moments ago, there was only one orc. Yume was attempting to draw the attention of one of the orcs away from him, but that in and of itself was highly problematic. Haruhiro at least had the [SWAT] skill; he was better suited than Yume to take on an orc alone. Glancing in Shihoru’s direction, he saw Mary swing her staff at an approaching orc, trying to get it to back off. The two of them were in trouble, too.

They were going to be overwhelmed. Don’t panic, don’t panic, don’t panic! He told himself. They weren’t fighting alone. Other Crimson Moon members were here too. They didn’t need to kill the orcs, only hold them off. But with orcs, it wasn’t as simple as

it sounded. Haruhiro had his hands full just trying to keep himself calm. Damn, he was terrified.

Mary and Shihoru. He had to take care of them first. They were the priority. No wait, scratch that. First he had to—a high-pitched battle cry sliced through the air. What the heck? Whose voice was that!? It didn't belong to any orc, that was for sure. It was human. A woman's.

"They're here!" Bri jumped into the air from his position atop the parapets.

The movements of the orcs from the northern wall slowed visibly. No, not just slowed, they were downright confused. Something was coming from behind them, a chorus of frenzied shouts.

"Reinforcements are here!" Bri blew a kiss in the direction of the new arrivals. "The Wild Eagle Regiment! KAJIKO, I LOVE YOU!!!"

Chapter 13: Our Mistake

PART 1 of 2

Things got one-sided after that.

The orcs from the northern wall were caught between the Green Storm Regiment and the Wild Eagle Regiment and their numbers steadily declined. How long did it take for the reservists to completely wipe out the orcs? Haruhiro didn't know, but it wasn't long. One or two minutes at most. The twenty plus orcs probably didn't even know what hit them before they died. They were the enemy, so Haruhiro didn't feel too sorry for them, but still… it was a horrendous massacre. He thought he'd gotten used to the stench of blood and corpses, but nothing had prepared him for the overwhelming reek of the scene before him now.

Kajiko and her Wild Angels rushed past Haruhiro's party. The white feathers decorating their scarves, helms, hats, and bandanas were splattered with bloodstains.

"Damn, they look HOT!" Ranta exclaimed.

"Brittany!" Kajiko's angry shout rose above the clamor of battle. "What's going on at the main gate!?"

Commander Bri, who was still standing atop the ramparts of the eastern wall, shook his head. "They haven't broken through yet! I can't see them from here, but it seems like they're having a tough time!"

"Then we'll bring down this fortress ourselves!" Kajiko raised both arms to rally the reservists. "Listen up, everyone! The army's got a bounty of a hundred gold on the head of the Guardian, Zorun Zesshu! And fifty gold for the head of the orc shaman Avaael, who's killed several regular army troops and Crimson Moon reservists!"

"What? A hundred!?" someone shouted.

"Ten thousand silvers!?" another cried, incredulous.

"No way! A hundred gold!?" cried another.

Yet another, “FIFTY gold!?”

“A hundred and fifty GOLD!? Seriously!?” shouted someone else.

When they heard the incredible bounty sums, most of the reservists in both regiments froze in their tracks, as if cold water had been poured on them. And right when everyone was distracted, fresh arrows from the watchtowers assaulted them once more. Several reservists were hit and went down. The oafish warrior in Choco’s party was among them, taking an arrow in the shoulder. Their Priest began to heal him immediately.

“S-shields!” Haruhiro hurriedly scooped an orc shield off the ground.

However, the other reservists didn’t care about orc arrows anymore. Their focus was on something completely different now. Reach the outer stair. Get into the keep. Kill the Guardian. Kill the shaman. Fifty gold. One hundred gold. One hundred and fifty gold. Everyone’s thoughts were on nothing but that now. Even Haruhiro found himself lured in by the promise of such a huge bounty. He couldn’t even fathom such a large sum.

An ear-splitting battle cry in a voice Haruhiro had heard before rose above the noise of battle. It belonged to Ron. “We’re gonna break into the keep first! No one can beat us!”

There had been a deadlock in the battle at the stairway by the eastern wall for a while now, but suddenly the enemy’s hard defensive line collapsed and the reservists broke through. There was no telling the difference between Green Storm and Wild Eagle members; everyone was rushing towards the outer stairs in one large mob. Arrows flew in streams from the slotted watchtower windows, but it wasn’t enough to stop the reservist tide. Individual reservists disappeared in the torrent, and no one could remain stationary.

Haruhiro was also picked up and swept along with the flood. He knew nothing except that his companions were still with him.

“I’m going to the main gate to see what’s going on!” Bri shouted. “Kajiko, you’re in command here!”

“The battle will be over by the time you get back!” Kajiko shouted back.

“Don’t get carried away!” Bri warned. “You’re all big kids now so act like it!”

“Tell that to the useless regular army!” said Kajiko. “I’m gonna claim the bounty for myself!”

“Whatever!” Bri said with exasperation. “Just try not to bite off more than you can chew!”

Bri disappeared. Haruhiro had no idea where he went-probably towards the main gate. It didn’t matter. He didn’t care. Bri could go where ever he wanted, Haruhiro was going to the outer stair. Actually, he was already there, but the entire area around the entrance was so jam packed with people he didn’t think there was any way he’d get through.

Yet he was still moving forward as the people in front steadily ascended the stairway. In fact, they were clambering up the stairs quite swiftly. Before he knew it, Haruhiro was almost on the roof of the keep, too. Whoa! What the hell!? The arrows. There were three watchtowers at the corners of the keep and arrows were being shot at them from all three. It was a cascade of orc arrows. A torrential downpour of the damned things.

Haruhiro barely managed to get his shield up in time. Several arrows lodged in his shield before he managed to cross the distance to the entrance of the keep. He ditched the shield just as he was shoved inside by the stream of reservists behind him. What about the others? Mogzo? Check. Ranta? Still here. Yume, Shihoru, Mary; check, check, check. He even thought he spotted Choco somewhere.

The passageway inside the keep was so packed that he had no idea what was going on. Rather than attempt to fight it, he let himself get pushed along with the flow. Quickly through the corridor, down a flight of stairs, from the third floor to the second to the first. The ceiling of the keep towered high above and the floor was spacious. It was like one open room with no walls.

Stairways were built into the four corners and Haruhiro guessed that the one he was descending now was the one in the southeast. He recalled that the stairways on the first floor were the only way to enter the watchtowers. So he assumed that it was also possible to access the watchtowers from the northwest, southwest, and northeast stairs. There were also four doors on each of the watchtowers’ inner walls, and all of them had been breached.

Which meant that the inside of the watchtowers had already been searched? On his way through the corridor and down the stairs, Haruhiro recalled stepping on and over several orc corpses. The situation on the ground floor of the keep was completely different, however. It seemed as though there had been some tough fighting going on before Haruhiro arrived. Scattered around were the bodies of more than ten orcs, with a number of reservists mixed in.

Some reservists were sitting off to the side, getting healed by their companions while others were… not getting healed. Dead, in other words.

“Ah… now we find out which one holds the jackpot,” said Kajiko.

It seemed that the Wild Angels had taken the northwest watchtower while Team Renji had claimed the southwest one. The other reservists had realized this and were going for the remaining northeast tower.

“Which one are we going for!?” Ranta asked, lifting his helm’s visor and looking at each of the three watchtowers in turn. “My vote’s for the northeast one! We ain’t gonna win against Kajiko and Renji!”

“No,” Haruhiro said.

He had to make a decision. So he decided before hesitation could set in and he started considering options too deeply; it was more instinct than cognition.

“We’ll follow Renji,” Haruhiro announced.

“Are you retarded!?” Ranta snapped. “We don’t have any chance of claiming the bounty if we follow them!”

“Does that matter? We never had a chance to begin with!” Yume retorted.

“Idiot girl!” Ranta shot back. “Where’s your self-confidence!?”

Shihoru smiled sardonically. “The person who claims that we don’t have a chance if we follow Renji has no right to talk about self-confidence.”

“Yeah, well,” Ranta said. “I guess. Whatever! Let’s go steal his kill then!”

Mogzo forced a laugh while Mary glared at Ranta coldly. “Coward.”

Ranta grinned smugly. “Awesome! For a Dread Knight like me, that’s the highest compliment I can get! Wahahaha! O Darkness, O Lord of Corruption… [DARK INVITATION]!”

A blackish, purplish cloud rose from just above the back of Ranta’s head. The cloud began to spin itself into a cyclone and form itself into some kind of shape. It resembled a headless human torso with two holes at the center of the chest area for eyes and a wide slit below for a mouth. A demon summoned through Dread Knight magic.

{Keeehehehehe! Heeehehehe! Kehekehe! RANTA WILL DIE!}

“Oh it’s not ‘DIE RANTA’ for a change? You’re predicting that I’m gonna die now, Zodiak!?”

{Eeeehehe… KILL RANTA…}

“Now you’re saying I’m gonna be murdered!?”

“Zodiak, shake!” Yume stuck her hand out to the demon as if it was a dog.

{DIE HUMAN PIG} Zodiak said even as he obediently reached out to touch Yume’s offered hand.

“Wow! Good boy, Zodiak! Good boy!” Yume said. “It ain’t nice to call Yume a pig though…”

{Kehehe… SORRY…}

“Zodiak, what the fuck!?” Ranta said. “You’re seriously apologizing?”

Zodiak’s response was to gaze blankly at Ranta. Wow. One-upped by his own minion, thought Haruhiro as he debated what to do about Choco’s party.

Finally, he settled with telling them, “I know it’s none of my business, but you guys should try not to overdo it!”

He didn’t know whether they would take his advice or not, but it seemed that they weren’t planning to go beyond the first floor for now. Several other parties had stopped here as well. The floor had already been cleared out, so it was safer. Yes, it was better if Choco stayed here.

In fact, maybe it was better if Haruhiro's party stayed as well. So why weren't they? Maybe because they'd already killed an orc. They were no longer virgins and maybe that made everyone feel more confident than usual. Morale was high and everyone wanted to keep a good thing going. Or maybe that wasn't it at all. At least Haruhiro didn't think so. But the usual Haruhiro would have at least stopped to consider sitting out the rest of the battle here. So why had his decision come so quickly this time?

Perhaps he thought that as long as they stayed close to Renji, it wouldn't be as dangerous? Yes, that was probably part of the reason. Team Renji was strong. As long as they stayed in Renji's proverbial shadow, there was no danger of getting themselves killed… most likely. But it wasn't as if Haruhiro intended to cower behind Renji the entire time. They would lend a hand in the fighting if they got a chance. By this point, there ought to be something they could do, however menial.

Maybe it was strange for Haruhiro to think so, but part of him wanted to help Renji. Even if they couldn't play a decisive role, it wasn't like they would be completely useless to have around. At the very least, Haruhiro wanted to be more useful to Renji than any of the other parties around, even if there was a risk of getting in the way and becoming a nuisance.

If it was only Haruhiro by himself, then he would have been called an idiot and become a laughing stock for having such thoughts. But he wasn't alone. His companions were with him. Mogzo alone was an incredibly strong Warrior. Ranta pissed him off in every conceivable fashion, but his unique way of using his skills made him a formidable fighter. So what if Yume tended to be airheaded? That's what let her approach things with such optimism. Shihoru's personality was unremarkable in every way, but she was far-sighted and cared deeply about her companions. And Mary was always there for them when they needed it.

Manato… we're a good team. I'm sorry you aren't here to see how far we've come.

With this team, together with his companions, Haruhiro wanted to aim higher. There was no need to rush or be impatient, but Haruhiro knew that they had it in them to rise above where they were.

"Let's goooooooooo!" Ranta charged at the head of their party as they chased after Team Renji.

Unwilling to compete with Renji, few of the other reservists were going for the southwest watchtower. They ascended the spiral stairs at a run.

“Yume’s gettin’ kinda dizzy!” Yume giggled.

Haruhiro could hear an incredibly loud clamor coming from above them; the sounds of battle.

“Jackpot!?” Haruhiro wondered.

Just as they were reaching the top of the stairs, they ran into a group of five reservists huddled together.

“What’re you guys doing!?” Ranta demanded angrily.

“We couldn’t go further even if we wanted to,” someone equipped like a Warrior gazed up at them. “It’s too dangerous!”

“Fucking idiots! You go in and fight because it’s dangerous!” Ranta gave his demon a hard shove forward. “Zodiak! Get in there and tell us what’s going on!”

{I don’t wanna! Don’t wanna, don’t wanna, don’t wanna!! Keeeshishishishiii!}

“What the hell, Zodaik!? Why!?” Ranta yelled.

Haruhiro clicked his tongue at Ranta. “Forget it, I’ll go take a look! You don’t have to sacrifice poor Zodiak…”

“Shut up, Haruhiro! He’s my demon and I’ll do whatever I want with him!”

{W-w-w-who’s yours? Nuh-uh, stupidhead! DIE! Eeehehehe…}

“If I die, then you’ll disappear too! Is that what you want!? HUH!?”

{Eeeehehehe! DIE RANTA DIE! Me wants! Wants, wants, wants! Heheheheeee!}

“What—”

Haruhiro shoved Ranta aside before he could say more. The other Crimson Moon party got out of his way and he poked his head out from the stairwell to take a look.

“Whoa…” he whispered in disbelief. ‘Dangerous’ didn’t even begin to describe the situation.

The circular room at the top of the tower had a fairly high ceiling and was more spacious than Haruhiro expected. He counted ten orcs as his eyes swept across the room and at the center of a flurry of activity saw Renji and Ron. It looked like the fight was going in their favor, but the opposite was true for Chibi, Sassa, and Adachi. They were steadily being pushed back against the walls.

Chibi was spinning her staff around and around furiously, apparently in an attempt to protect Sassa and Adachi. Renji's party were the only humans in the room, and they had only managed to take one orc down so far. Haruhiro withdrew back into the stairwell.

"The situation's not good," he reported. "Renji and Ron are fine but at this rate, Chibi and the others…"

They had to get in there and help, but was it feasible? Haruhiro's team bailing Team Renji out of a situation even Renji couldn't handle? That had to be some kind of joke. But Renji was in a really bad situation. Five versus ten. Team Renji might have been super human, but even they couldn't handle those odds. Not against enemies as strong as orcs.

If Haruhiro's party went in, they could at least even things out numerically. They would have to help Chibi's group first. Renji and Ron could hold their own for now. And if Haruhiro's team could free up Renji's other party members, then the fighting would become easier for Renji and Ron, too.

"Mogzo, head up and to the right!" Haruhiro ordered. "Protect Chibi's group! Me and Ranta will be right behind you! Yume, Shihoru, Mary, do what you think is best depending on the situation!"

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Mogzo rushed in with a battle cry.

"Goddamn it! It's like babysitting kids!" Ranta said as he followed.

"Why don't you try saying that to Renji's face?" Haruhiro shot back.

"No way! Are you retarded!?"

"Look who's talking! Let's go!" Haruhiro ordered.

Mogzo, Ranta, and Haruhiro ascended the stairs to the top. Suddenly, the hazy, indistinct line appeared. Haruhiro was already moving by the time his brain registered its appearance. His body followed along the line's path in something between a walk and a run, as if he was gliding across the surface of the floor.

Everything went absolutely silent. Time didn't stop, but everything seemed to move much slower than normal. He was right behind the orc now. [BACKSTAB]. Even though the orc was armored in thick plate mail, Haruhiro's dagger slipped smoothly through it. He could feel it hit something beneath. A vital point. When Haruhiro pulled the dagger back out, the orc fell over without a sound, dead.

"What was that…?" Sassa whispered, expression disbelieving.

Haruhiro shook his head; he couldn't explain it properly even if he tried.

"THANK YOU!" Mogzo sent one of the orcs who were attacking Chibi flying with [RAGE CLEAVE].

"Oy! Zodiak! Get your ass back here and help me!" Ranta demanded.

{Feehehehehe… Eeeehehehehe… I don't wanna! Wimp imp! Wimp imp! DIE RANTA…}

"Damn it! There's not enough space here!" Ranta complained.

Ranta's fighting style was based on avoiding direct clashes; he ran around until he saw a chance to strike. Oftentimes, it worked out quite nicely because it kept the attention of one enemy entirely on him.

Yume, Shihoru, and Mary were up the stairs now.

"Renji!" Haruhiro shouted as he used [SWAT] to deflect the blows of another orc, leaving Sassa with the opportunity to go on the offensive.

He noticed that Team Renji's Thief was very good with the [SWAT] skill. Haruhiro was above her in terms of raw strength, but Sassa was spry and agile. She moved rhythmically.

"Chibi and the others are fine!" he shouted towards Renji.

Renji's gaze shifted towards Haruhiro for a brief moment. He flashed Haruhiro a slight smile. Whoa. Renji's so cool… He was swinging Ishh Dogrann's sword with all his might,

but with the grace of a ballroom dancer. What kind of Warrior technique was that? Was it a technique at all? He slashed at two orcs and brought both down, one immediately after the other. Ron also took one down using brute force, but Renji was already on his third. He lopped the next one's head clean off its shoulders.

“Jeeru mea gram fel kanon!” Adachi cast the [BLOOD FREEZE] spell and froze the legs of an approaching orc, but the orc kept coming in spite of it. So he cast another without hesitation, “Jeeru mea gram tera kanon!”

The [ICE COMET] spell. The ice elemental froze the moisture in the air instantly as it sped towards the orc, creating a ball of solid ice that smacked the orc right in the face. It must have been as painful as it looked, because the orc went down to one knee. Sassa was already moving. Just as she passed by the orc, she slammed her dagger down into its neck. Haruhiro didn’t even realize [BACKSTAB] could be used like that. It was a gorgeous Mage-Thief combination. Team Haruhiro, however, had no intention of being outstripped.

“Oom rel eckt nem das!” Shihoru chanted.

[SHADOW BIND] locked the orc in place. Mary held nothing back as she smashed her staff into it, and Yume followed up with a vicious slash while it was still dazed, sending it reeling backwards. Mogzo’s turn now. Instead of [RAGE CLEAVE], he darted forward, sword extended, and rammed it through the orc’s throat. It was the one-armed attack, [SPEEDING THRUST]. Of course the orc went down and didn’t get back up after that.

Haruhiro glanced around. The orcs? None. They were all dead.

“Damn it,” Ron waved a bloody sword at Haruhiro and the others. “We didn’t need your help!”

“You ungrateful—” Ranta began, but one icy look from Ron and he immediately backed down. “S-sorry… never mind.”

“Wimp…” Mary whispered.

{Wimp wimp wimp! Keehehehehe… wimp imp! Eeehehe… imp imp imp!}

“Imps are preferable,” Shihoru said.

Ouch. Not that Haruhiro disagreed.

“Thanks,” came a low, slightly husky voice.

Damn, even Renji’s voice was cool. Despite that though, a feeling of melancholy hung in the air. Haruhiro never expected to hear the word “thanks” from such an awesome

voice and to be honest, it touched him deeply. Hiding his inner turmoil under a cloak of calm, Haruhiro shrugged his shoulders.

“I owed you one,” Haruhiro said.

“Now we’re even,” Renji replied.

“Yeah, I guess.”

Renji then turned to Mogzo and said, “You’re pretty useful.”

“Huh?” Mogzo glanced this way and that as if to confirm that Renji was talking to him, before finally pointing to himself. “Me!? N-n-no way… I-I mean, I’m not…”

Haruhiro was bothered by Renji’s choice of the word “useful” and he wondered if it was really a compliment. However, both Renji and Mogzo were Warriors. A Warrior knew a fellow Warrior best, or so the saying went… or so Haruhiro thought he had heard somewhere before. There was no doubt though, that one Warrior was in the position to best judge another.

Besides, it was no exaggeration to say that Renji was one of the most reputable members of Crimson Moon at the moment. Of course being acknowledged by Renji in any way whatsoever was a compliment. And Mogzo deserved it. He was the best of Team Haruhiro.

“Anyways,” Adachi pushed his glasses back up his nose. Now that he was calm again, there was a streak of sarcasm in his tone. “Looks like we chose the wrong tower. Mind if we sit out the rest of the battle here, Renji?”

Renji didn’t respond. Instead, he merely turned and headed down the stairway again. A shout suddenly echoed through the tower.

“What the—!? Ground level!”

Haruhiro didn’t know whose voice it was, but it was nobody from their parties.

Haruhiro tilted his head to the side. “Ground level?”

Renji took off at a run.

“Haruhiro!” Ranta slapped Haruhiro on the back. “We’re going too!”

What was going on? Haruhiro felt his heartbeat suddenly quicken. Strange. It was beating fast and hard. Ground level… What about it? He and the others flew down the spiral stairs. Down and down and down. His ears felt stuffy, all sound was muted. Weird. What was going on? Why did his senses feel so dull all of a sudden? He didn't know. Reason? Cause? The more he didn't understand the more it confused him.

He felt shaky on his feet. Down they kept going, one floor after another. Finally, he reached the ground floor.

They were dead. The reservists. So many dead bodies. Crimson Moon bodies. The floor was littered with corpses. Orcs were present too. But why? The area was cleared earlier so where had the orcs come from? And not just one or two, but a large group. Among them was one bigger than the rest. It was armored in bright, flashy scarlet plate mail from head to toe. Hair dyed black and yellow spilled from underneath its helm. It had one sword in each hand.

It looked strong. Dangerously and deathly strong. Strong enough to dual-wield swords like they were made of tinfoil. Zoran Zesshu. There was no doubt about it. The orc matched Bri's description perfectly. Zoran, the chief of the Zesshu Clan, whose head was worth a hundred gold. The Guardian of the fortress.

Zoran swung his swords with monstrous strength at the leader of Choco's party. It seemed like he was attempting to block Zoran's attack with his own sword, but he couldn't even get his weapon up in time. Haruhiro thought that he heard the guy gasp in surprise just as Zoran brought both blades down on him. The next moment, his head was separated from his shoulders.

It was an effortless final blow. What the hell… What about the others in the party? The other Warrior, the Priest, the short-haired Mage? They were nowhere to be found. Then, Haruhiro spotted them. They were all on the ground in a bloody heap, dead. Their third Warrior, the oafish looking one, was still on his feet, fighting a different orc who had him almost backed against the wall. Next to him was Choco. The Warrior was trying to protect her.

From the looks of it though, he was going to be overwhelmed. Choco was going to be left wide open in a few more seconds. The orc was strong. Stronger than any of the ones they had fought so far. Even their weapons and armor were different. The difference was so vast, it made the equipment the other orcs used look like toys. They must have

been the Guardian's personal entourage. There were also a few orcs with Zoran who weren't wearing any armor. At their belts hung large, flask-like objects. They must have been the mages—shamans.

Team Renji was already charging in. The orcs, however, numbered more than ten; there were probably closer to twenty. The ground level was also large and spacious. Illogically spacious.

What was happening with the oafish Warrior and Choco? The Warrior had locked blades with his orc opponent, but the next moment, he was down on ground after the orc kneed him hard in the stomach. Shit. This was bad. Really bad. Shit, shit, shit. Choco grasped her dagger in both hands and raised it in a guard position, tip pointed at the orc. Her hands trembled and her body was teetering backwards. At this rate, she would be finished.

"CHOCO!" Haruhiro yelled, rushing towards her.

Haruhiro thought that she turned to look at him in that moment. Or started to, at least. But the orc brought his sword hard and fast down into Choco's shoulder, burying the blade deep. He then drew it back out, kicked her off it and turned towards Haruhiro.

"No!"

Once, twice, three times the orc's sword came slashing at him. All he could think about was Choco. No way. Choco… Why? Why did this happen? No… Haruhiro held his head in his hands. He could hear himself saying something, but he didn't know what it was. He didn't know what anything was anymore.

Chapter 14: Words Unspoken, Left Unsaid

The vending machine was one, maybe two minutes from his house. A little further up the road was a convenience store, but if he went there he would probably bump into someone he knew no matter what time it was. He didn't like that, so he took shelter in the refuge area—not that it was for refugees or anything—next to the vending machine.

It wasn't like he often wanted to run away, to get away or anything, but maybe once in a while, when he did sort of feel like getting away, or when he simply had to get away, he would leave his house and make his way to the vending machine and kill time for a while. He probably got into this habit around the time he was in elementary school. Maybe fifth grade? Probably.

At home, he shared a room with his older brother so it wasn't like he could get any privacy in there when he wanted to be alone. Whenever he tried to get his brother out of the room when he did want to be alone, his brother would always tell him to quit complaining and maybe threaten to kick him or something. But that didn't change what Haruhiro wanted.

So he started to retreat to that vending machine. Sometimes he would buy a drink, sometimes he wouldn't. Sometimes he'd drink the drink, sometimes he wouldn't. He'd space out for a while and go home when he felt like going home.

The pattern repeated itself for a while until one summer day when he was in sixth grade. He was taking shelter next to the vending machine as usual when someone else came. He considered hiding but there was nowhere to hide, and then he considered pretending not to know them, but he did because she lived in the same neighborhood. Choco.

Choco always wore her hair in a short bob cut that made her look like a Japanese kappa creature. He had known her since she was small, and he couldn't remember a single time her hair wasn't cut like that. In fact, whenever he thought of the word "kappa" Choco would immediately come to mind.

She wasn't exactly the open, friendly type, and even now Haruhiro had no idea what to think of her. Even at school, she was slightly distant and aloof. Well, just a little bit because it wasn't like she didn't have any friends. However, rather than having any close friends, she was the sort that was merely included in a group.

Haruhiro didn't understand why, but he had been interested in her since he was in preschool. Maybe because she was… different from all the other kids. Actually, it wasn't really a conscious thing on his part, it was a sort of subconscious interest that bordered on being a real liking of her.

Ever since he was born, Choco was the first girl he had ever liked and his feelings hadn't changed since. They were in preschool together and were in the same class several times in elementary school, too. They lived closed to each other and often talked about this and that. Haruhiro supposed that would make them close friends, but he never said anything about his like of her.

Not that he dared to, anyway.

When they were both in third grade, there was a rumor circulating that Choco liked a boy named Kawabe. One day, when Haruhiro and Choco were walking home together, he asked her offhandedly if the rumor was really true and after thinking about it in silence for a couple of moments, she told him yes.

Traumatized didn't even begin to describe Haruhiro's feelings then. Kawabe was a slender kid who didn't exactly excel at sports, but he was learning the piano and seemed like he came from a refined household. And apparently, he was the type that Choco was into.

Really. Really now. Was she really serious? No way…

Kawabe was the polar opposite of Haruhiro, possessing all the qualities that Haruhiro lacked, but he and Haruhiro were friendly enough that they played together from time to time. Kawabe was a decent guy who didn't have anything unlikeable about him and placed pretty highly amongst Haruhiro's friend ranking list. In fact, Haruhiro rather liked him.

So Choco likes him. Oh. Kawabe's a good guy. Right. I need to help her out even if I don't know how. Yeah.

Or so Haruhiro thought and began to take steps towards it. Did Choco want him to deliver a note to Kawabe? Kawabe's family was pretty strict so he didn't have a cell phone, but if Choco wrote him a note Haruhiro was sure Kawabe would read it. He would probably even write a response back to her because he was a nice guy like that.

Haruhiro asked Choco if she wanted to do that, but she declined, telling him that it was fine and that she didn't intend to do anything of the sort. When Haruhiro responded noncommittally, she went on to say that it was a casual kind of like.

A casual kind of like…? Well, it wasn't like Haruhiro didn't try. He did. Stuff like attempting to get Choco and Kawabe to talk to each other, setting things up so that they would be alone, etc. When he thought about it now, it all seemed rather silly, but it was serious business back then. Kawabe was a good guy and Choco… well, Haruhiro liked her.

At any rate, it was that summer day in sixth grade when Choco came to the vending machine. Haruhiro asked her what she was doing, but she told him not much, nothing, I'm just here. Then she went on to say that it was hot so she wanted a soda but there were no sodas in the fridge at home, so here she was at the vending machine. They talked for maybe another ten or fifteen minutes after that and from that day on, they would bump into each other at the vending machine now and then.

Choco favored carbonated drinks, but during the winter she would buy canned corn soup. When she drank soda, she would make comments like, "Ow, my throat hurts," and when she drank the corn soup, she would yelp, "Wah, hot," and blow on the contents to cool it down. Yes, this was the Choco he liked. However, it wasn't some sort of desperate, intense like… more of a natural, mellow, matter-of-course like. Yes, he liked those things about her and that continued for a long, long time.

For her part, Choco was the type who was naturally attracted to boys. It didn't show on the surface, but she had a history of casually saying how nice X or Y boy was and for the time being, thought of no one else but that person. She would only realize that she liked the person after she admitted to herself that she actually liked him, so it was almost like her fondness for the person grew more as she thought about how much she liked him.

Haruhiro would ask if she wanted to go out with the person, and Choco would reply by saying that she didn't not want to go out with him, but she didn't really like him that much. No, not that much…

And it wasn't as if Haruhiro didn't not want to go out with her, if he could, but Choco was always in love with some other guy and Haruhiro found himself unconsciously asking her about who she currently liked. Even if he wasn't truly interested in knowing, she always answered him earnestly, which made him put effort into attempting to hook the two of them up or at least help them to get to know each other better, even though he never really intended to. Choco, of course, never asked him to; Haruhiro did it all on his own.

He often wondered why he did such things and couldn't find an answer. Probably because he was an idiot, he thought on more than one occasion.

Choco was always impassive and expressionless, but when she talked about the boys she liked, she all of a sudden became animated and lively. At the end of their conversations, her cheeks would be a little rosy, making Haruhiro believe that she enjoyed such conversations, which made him happy in turn. They had been friends for such a long time, but even so, he was always trying to think of ways to make her happy. He didn't even understand why himself.

Choco was a real mystery. She didn't like to read books, never listened to music, didn't watch TV, and even if she picked up a hobby now and then, she would soon lose interest and drop it. When he asked her if there was anything she absolutely loved doing, she answered him swiftly with, no, nothing. Haruhiro couldn't find anything that pleased her, which made him want to try more so that he could see her smile, but nothing he said or did ever worked.

That night, he was squatting next to the vending machine again, staring out into space when Choco came. He had a feeling that Choco would come… but all the times he had feelings like that in the past, she never did. Tonight though, she did, and he thought to himself, YES! It made him want to do a victory pose right there and then but he resisted the urge, forcing himself to calm down.

"Hey," he greeted casually.

Choco waved a hand at him. "Hey."

Her wave and return greeting was adorable and he was reminded once more of why he liked her. Currently though, Choco's crush of the week was one of her classmates, a boy

with a rare name, Hidemasa. Hidemasa was also a decent guy and good looking too, which made Haruhiro wonder if Choco went for the attractive ones.

Hidemasa wasn't super popular with girls, but from a guy's perspective, he was one of those people you had to admit was cool even if you didn't want to, so it made him wonder why girls couldn't see that in him, too. No, actually there were always one, two, a couple girls secretly in love with him. Choco was right to like a person like that. And Haruhiro couldn't blame her.

In fact, he supported her and wished her well. There was no way Haruhiro could win against competition like Hidemasa, after all. And in the long term, it seemed that Choco would be happy with a guy like him.

Choco bought a soda. Some sort of fruity soda. She pulled back the pull-top to pop the can open and took a sip. Then her face scrunched up as a small sigh escaped her lips.

"Ow. My throat hurts," said Choco.

"Does it?" asked Haruhiro.

"Yeah, it does."

"If it hurts, why do you drink it then?"

"Because I feel like it."

"Okay."

"I heard soda isn't really healthy," Choco said.

"It's not," Haruhiro confirmed. "That's why sports stars don't drink it. Soda."

"I don't play sports."

"Then I guess it's okay to drink soda."

"I don't drink it that often," remarked Choco.

"I see you drinking it all the time," said Haruhiro.

"Only when I'm here."

"Oh."

Then Choco went on to tell him in a bored tone about how she went to karaoke with Hidemasa recently. It seemed as if karaoke didn't interest her. Haruhiro also made it seem like he was equally disinterested as he listened but he was actually paying close attention as Choco talked about the songs Hidemasa chose. They were all songs from popular artists, so everyone knew the melodies and got really into it.

Apparently that was the type of person Hidemasa was, Choco said. And when Choco got tired after a little while into the karaoke session, Hidemasa approached her to ask if she was okay. That Hidemasa… he was a really cool guy.

"You see," Choco suddenly said. "I'm not really good with paying attention to how other people feel, so I think guys who can do that are great."

"So it's like looking for things you lack yourself in others?" Haruhiro asked.

"Hiro, you also think that I'm insensitive?"

"I never said that. It's not like you go out of your way to make people feel uncomfortable."

"I guess I don't," Choco agreed.

"I don't think you do."

"You don't either, Hiro."

"Really? You think I'm a sensitive person?" Haruhiro asked.

"To me?"

"Yeah. We've known each other for a long time."

"Hiro, you don't have anyone?" Choco abruptly inquired.

"Anyone what?"

"That you like. You know, a girl."

Haruhiro had no idea how to respond and as he thought about it, his heart drummed hard in his chest. Even as he thought this was this big chance to tell her, a part of him was telling himself, Chance? What chance? This isn't a chance at all!

He thought he liked Choco, but what if he was wrong? He wasn't wrong, but he was. He didn't know how to put it. Or maybe what he felt went beyond a simple like. Maybe it surpassed the notion of like. It was almost as if what he liked or didn't like hardly mattered anymore, as long as Choco was happy. He felt like an idiot for thinking that, but that's the way he truly felt… or so he thought. Maybe.

It was because of the distance that they had always kept between them that he could talk to her the way they were talking now. Once she had a boyfriend, maybe these chats would come to an end too. Well, he'd cross that bridge when he got to it. It was an unrelated matter, anyways. Painful as it was, Haruhiro had always watched on the sidelines as Choco fell for other boys. He was used to it.

But, yes, he liked her.

"Nope, no one. If there was, I'd tell you," Haruhiro said.

"Well, I don't really care anyways," Choco replied.

"That's mean. I always listen to stories about your crushes."

"Dork," she whispered inaudibly.[1]

"Huh? Did you say something?" asked Haruhiro.

"Yeah, I did," said Choco.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you…"

Haruhiro had no idea what that was all about, but suspected that Choco had noticed. There was no doubt she realized that he liked her. She must have realized. Maybe. Did she really? Suddenly, she crouched down next to him. Her shoulder was so close, it almost touched his. Her gaze was fixed on the ground in front of her.

"If you ever get a crush on someone," Choco started.

"Uh…"

"Tell me, okay?"

"I thought you weren't interested."

"Yeah, but tell me anyway."

“Okay, I will.”

Choco turned to look at him now, the corners of her lips curved up in a tiny smile while her eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

“Hiro, you wouldn’t lie, right?” Choco asked.

“I might, depending on the situation,” Haruhiro said. “But probably not to you, Choco.”

“I know you wouldn’t.”

Yet he was lying to her at that very moment. And she probably knew it. Because Choco, I’ve always loved you. I’ve loved you and only you for a long, long time. Not that he could tell her. Not that he would ever be able to tell her…

[1]Note: This was previously translated to “chowderhead” but after some internal debate, it was changed to “dork”. All previous usages will also be updated in the near future. We apologize for any confusion.

Chapter 15: Line Between Life and Death

Haruhiro remembered it all… or he had a feeling he did. He suddenly recalled many things… or he thought he did. But the memory left as fast as it returned. There was no doubt he had been able to grasp the memory for a moment, but it was out of reach again. A second ago, he had recalled everything. Or what he thought was everything, since he couldn't be sure. But he couldn't remember anything now.

Why couldn't he be sure? Why didn't he know? He had known a few moments ago. That feeling was the only thing that remained. Deep within himself, something remained. A feeling that something had once been there but was now gone, as if whatever it was had been pried clean off and left a hole where it had once been. If he were to inspect the hollowness, he could somehow make a guess at what it used to contain.

Choco.

The return of his memories of Choco, forgotten once more. He had a feeling that the memories had something to do with Choco. Haruhiro probably knew her. They were acquaintances, maybe even friends. But that was all he knew. He couldn't remember anything else about her. Nothing was left, not even the tiniest clues that could have hinted to what their relationship was.

"Haruhiro!" Ranta shook him hard. "Hey! Quit spacing out at a time like this!"

"I—I wasn't…" Haruhiro croaked. He wasn't? Really? No, Ranta was right. He had spaced out.

The Guardian Zoran Zesshu, his honor guard, and the orc shamans had descended upon the first floor of the keep and begun a massacre. Nearly all the reservists who had been there were dead. Choco. Yes, Choco too. She was dead and so was her party. They were all dead. The leader, the Warrior, their Priest, the girl with the short hair, and Choco herself. What about the oafish Warrior? He was sprawled next to a wall and at least wounded, if not dead. Probably heavily wounded. They had all been killed by the orcs.

Choco had been killed.

Her death had taken Haruhiro by surprise and he was completely shocked by the turn of events, but he wasn't as sorrowful, outraged, or pained as he perhaps should have

been. It was more of an intense dissatisfaction at the way things turned out. Was it really okay that things turned out like this? He thought to himself. He felt a sort of deep consternation at it. After all, they were both Crimson Moon reservists and she was his junior in the organization. They talked on occasion and… maybe they had known each other before they came to this world. And now she was dead.

Haruhiro felt something was intrinsically wrong with his reaction to her death. He should have felt more… more… well, more than what he felt now. But he didn't. It wasn't a natural reaction. It was terrible for him not to feel anything more at her death. Yet he didn't know why it was terrible. They might have known each other, but he had no idea what kind of relationship it had been. Maybe they had been mere acquaintances and talked once or something and that was it.

Now wasn't the time to think about it. Ranta was right; their current situation needed his immediate attention. The remaining reservists, Team Renji included, were fiercely battling Zoran as a group, yet even Renji himself couldn't gain an upper hand over the orc leader.

No, never mind gaining an advantage; Renji was barely able to ward off Zoran's powerful attacks in the first place. Renji was blocking and dodging desperately, unable to counterattack. And he was covered in blood. It wasn't a fatal injury, but he had taken a blow to the head and was bleeding profusely.

Ron let out a loud battle cry, intending to join the fight, but Renji shouted, "Stay away! You'll only get in the way! Stay back!"

It probably wasn't about having a manly duel one-on-one with his opponent for the sake of pride, Haruhiro realized. It was simply too dangerous for anyone else to approach. Zoran's reach, the raw strength in his arms, his broad shoulders, and powerfully built chest… even his movements were far superior to Ishh Dogrann, the last orc Haruhiro witnessed Renji fight when Altana had been invaded.

One hit. That's all it would take. A single hit from Zoran would mean instant death.

Even members of Zoran's honor guard were careful to keep a generous distance away from Zoran, as if they feared accidently getting caught by a stray attack. So it was Renji and Zoran fighting one-on-one while the other reservists, including the rest of Team

Renji, took on the other orcs and the orc shamans. And they were losing. The reservists were being overwhelmed.

Ron locked blades with his orc opponent, but it was obvious to Haruhiro that he was having a tough time. Chibi, Sassa, and Adachi had been forced to retreat until their backs were nearly against a wall. Haruhiro wondered how many of the reservists remaining could hold their own against the orcs. Probably not many. Even now they were fighting a losing battle and the tide didn't look like it was going to change.

"A shaman!" Shihoru cried.

One of the orc shamans was approaching the spot beneath a stairwell where Haruhiro and his group were huddled. Mogzo leapt out first to meet the shaman head on. The shaman halted then lifted up the large flask-like object hanging off its belt high. It pulled out the stopper and things started swarming out. Insects. A massive horde of them.

"What—!?" Mogzo gasped.

The insect swarm went straight for his face. Mogzo was wearing a helm, but the bugs were small and poured in from the gaps. Mogzo let out an agonized shriek and looked as if he was about to go down. Shit! Without Mogzo they were in trouble.

"Mogzo! Stay on your feet!" Haruhiro exclaimed. "You can't go down! You can't stop!"

"AAAAAAAGH!" Mogzo shouted, staggering about and swinging his sword wildly around.

"God damn it!" Ranta jumped out from the stairwell and rushed towards the shaman. Midway there however, his entire body suddenly went rigid and he stopped moving. Ranta let out an ululating howl but couldn't do anything more.

"What the—!?" exclaimed Haruhiro.

It had to be the orc shaman. It had sicced its insects on Mogzo and now had its palm raised towards Ranta.

"Is that what Bri meant by psionic abilities!?" Haruhiro wondered.

Yume pulled out her bow and shot an arrow at the shaman. When it jumped to the side to avoid getting hit, Ranta was free to move again. But while that was a good thing, Yume's arrow also narrowly missed Ron's face after it flew past the shaman.

“What the hell!?” Ron yelped.

“S-sorry!” apologized Yume.

“Yume, you can’t use a bow in here!” Haruhiro said. “The fighting’s too chaotic!”

“Umm…” Yume thought about it for a second, then, “Okay, got it!”

“Oom rel eckt pram das!” Shihoru fired the [SHADOW COMPLEX] spell from her staff. The elemental flew in a tight spiral towards the shaman, hit it in the face and started seeping into it through its nose and mouth.

Was it enough? The shaman swayed on its feet for a second, then shook its head vigorously but that was it.

“It resisted the spell!” Shihoru said between clenched teeth.

“I’ll kill it then!” shouted Ranta. “[HATRED’S CUT]!”

Ranta’s movements were swift but the shaman had anticipated the attack. It sprang backwards effortlessly and, at the same time, Orc A from Zoran’s honor guard stepped forward to take its place. Orc A blocked Ranta’s attack with its own sword in a resounding clang of steel. They almost locked blades before Ranta yelped and leapt back, trying to put distance between them with [EXPEL FRENZY]. Orc A chased without hesitation, not intending to let Ranta get out of range. It attacked immediately and crushed Ranta’s guard.

Shit! Ranta was in huge trouble now. They had to back him up or he was finished. But can I actually do it? Haruhiro whispered to himself. He had no choice but to try. Just as Haruhiro made to join the fight, another orc emerged and cut him off. Orc B was also an honor guard member and the air of intimidation surrounding it was incredible. Haruhiro broke into a cold sweat. Do I really have to do this? A part of him wondered. Seriously?

Orc B attacked in rapid succession while Haruhiro deflected with [SWAT]. The orc’s attacks were so powerful, Haruhiro’s head spun and his arm went numb. He was terrified. Scared witless. No way… there was no way he could fight this orc. It was too strong. He was going to die.

“[SMASH]!”

Mary's attack was impeccably timed, but ultimately unsuccessful. The orc immediately brought up its shield to block. It turned its head towards Mary while keeping its body facing Haruhiro. Maybe Mary hadn't completely failed after all. Now! Haruhiro threw himself at the orc. Perhaps Orc B intended to whack Haruhiro with its shield, but Haruhiro sidestepped it and, imitating what Sassa had done earlier, raised his dagger and aimed for the orc's neck.

He was close. So close. He gasped as a swarm of insects assaulted him before he could carry out his attack. He shut his mouth and eyes tight and dropped low to the ground. What the hell!? Bugs… bugs everywhere. Bugs, bugs, bugs. Where were they coming from? When did the shaman attack? Bugs. Bugs all over him…

"Haru, get back!" Mary yelled.

As much as he wanted to retreat, he had no idea which direction to go. They were in his mouth now. The insects. It made him reflexively want to spit, but if he opened his mouth, more insects would pour in. He couldn't open his eyes either. What was happening? He had no idea anymore. Shit. He was in deep shit. He was going to die. Even now, Orc B was probably moving to finish him off. In another moment, he would be cut down. Dead.

"Over here, Haru!"

Yume's voice. She grabbed his wrist, pulling him away somewhere. Water, was the first thought that came to his head. Water. He fumbled for his canteen, opened it and poured its contents over his face then rinsed out his mouth, spitting bugs out. He could see again. He could breathe without inhaling insects.

"I'm okay now!" he told Yume. He wasn't okay though. Nothing was okay. Everything was going to hell.

Ranta was being overwhelmed by Orc A. He could go down at any moment. Despite having been assaulted by insects, Mogzo had somehow managed to draw Orc B's attention away from Haruhiro. Mary was attempting to defend Shihoru from Orc C's attacks and probably couldn't keep it up for much longer. He had to do something.

Team Renji was also struggling. Renji was in a constant state of retreat, trying to fend off Zoran's attacks. The other four members of his party were grouped close, fighting

defensively and trying their best to cover each other. Were any of the other reservists still alive?

Annihilated.

That was the only word that came to Haruhiro's mind. The others had been completely and utterly annihilated. No way. This had to be some sort of joke…

"Yume, help Mary!" Haruhiro ordered while moving to help Ranta himself.

The problem was, how was he going to help? He couldn't get in position behind Orc A without exposing his own back to another orc. He suddenly spotted a sword lying on the ground. He didn't know whose it was and didn't care. He scooped it up and hurled it at Orc A in desperation. Orc A blocked it easily with its shield, but did stagger backwards a little. That gave Ranta a moment's reprieve.

"Fuck!" Ranta yelled. "This is bullshit! Seriously, what the fuck!"

"What happened to Zodiak!?" said Haruhiro.

"Gone! Taken out in one hit!" Ranta replied. "Stupid weak ass demon! [ANGER THRUST]!"

Haruhiro had to give Ranta credit for having the guts to take the offensive again in these circumstances. Orc A was prepared, however, and knocked Ranta's longsword aside with ease. Its counterattack caught Ranta on the head.

"ARGH!" Ranta yelled wordlessly as he reeled from the blow.

He was wearing a helm, but a hit like that to the head was still devastating.

"I won't let you!" Haruhiro tackled Orc A with no regard for his own safety—or rather, made it seem like he was going to tackle it.

The orc took the bait and turned its full attention to Haruhiro now. It attacked, and Haruhiro deflected with [SWAT], [SWAT], [SWAT].

"Get up, Ranta!" shouted Haruhiro.

"You don't need to tell me!" Ranta yelled back. "[HUNDRED CUTS OF REPENTANCE]!"

Was that even a legit skill? Ranta was making shit up again. He rained a flurry of blows in rapid succession on Orc A, all of which the orc blocked. But at least the orc was on the defensive now. Now was the time to press the attack. Even if it was in desperation, even if it was only a single orc, they had to decrease the number of enemies.

Haruhiro had to get into position behind Orc A to [BACKSTAB]. He would finish it in one blow. He had to. And in the moment he made up his mind… Yume's sudden cry rang in his ears. She had been sent flying head over heels by Orc C. A wide strip of red blood ran from her shoulder down the front of her chest. Orc C began to stalk after Yume to finish her off, but Mary stepped into its path.

She spun her staff around in a wide arc at the orc, but it deftly caught the attack on its shield and shoved her aside.

"No!" Haruhiro rushed towards Orc C, but he wasn't going to make it.

Yume, however, hadn't given up yet. She pulled out a throwing knife and, gasping "[STAR PIERCE]!" lobbed it at the orc. Orc C stepped to the side and the knife flew harmlessly past, but it bought them another brief moment. Thanks to that, Haruhiro got there in time. At this point, he couldn't care less about his own safety anymore. He was going to full body tackle the orc and whatever happened to him next would happen.

That was his intention, but something in the corner of his eye caught his attention. Something to his left. Haruhiro didn't mean to look, but was glad that he did. An orc shaman was taking a deep breath and preparing to exhale. What was it doing? It opened its mouth and… Fire!

Haruhiro threw himself to the ground and narrowly avoided getting enveloped by the stream of fire that erupted from the shaman's mouth. Hot! Hot, hot, hot! His cloak had caught fire. But he didn't care about that, he had to get to Yume.

But it was over. Orc C was standing over her, mid-swing in the finishing blow. Yume was done for. Dead.

Or not. It wasn't over yet. They had Mogzo. By some fortuitous providence of chance, Team Haruhiro had Mogzo. Mogzo slammed his body into Orc C and sent it sprawling back and away from Yume. But the orc shaman came again. It spit out another stream of white-hot fire that seemed to swallow Mogzo whole. Mogzo never stopped however.

He swung his sword around with terrifying determination and the shaman, cowed by Mogzo's force of will, quickly scrambled away.

"Fall back!" Haruhiro shouted, realizing that it was the only thing they could do now. "Retreat!"

This wasn't a battle they could win. If they tried to fight, they would all die. If they kept trying to fight, the entire team would be wiped out. It wasn't his own unwillingness to die. He was less afraid of death for himself than he was of his companions dying. He didn't want the others to die here. He refused to let them die here.

"To the watchtower! Fall back for now!" he said again.

But would they be able to retreat successfully?

Chapter 16: Last Stand

PART 1 of 3

Long answer short, yes, they got out.

Haruhiro remembered ripping off his burning cloak, hurling it at a nearby orc, dragging Yume to her feet and forcing her to run. After that, he was so preoccupied with getting away that everything was a blur of events he couldn't recall with any clarity.

They eventually ducked into one of the stairwells leading up to a watchtower. Another party had hidden themselves there without any intention of joining the fight on the ground floor. Haruhiro didn't recall whether they switched places or chased the other party out, but that's where Team Haruhiro stopped now to catch their breath.

Mary had healed the critically injured Yume right away and was now working on Mogzo. His armor and helm were still intact, but he had taken the brunt of an orc shaman's fire blast and was badly burned. Was he okay? Haruhiro didn't think so.

"Thank you, Mogzo," Yume went to sit down beside the Warrior. "If you hadn't come, Yume would've been killed."

"Oh, uhh…" Mogzo hesitated. "We're friends, right? We look out for each other."

"Yeah," Yume replied. "You're right."

Ranta sat on the stairs, knees drawn up to his chest, uncharacteristically silent. Neither Mary nor Shihoru said a word either. Even Haruhiro didn't feel like talking. Shit. The silence was suffocating. It was a miracle that everyone was still alive. If anyone had made even a single mistake—no. They had made lots of mistakes already. It wasn't about messing up or doing everything perfectly, in the end it came down to sheer, dumb luck.

If they had been unlucky, one of them would've died. And if one person had gone down, then a second or third person would've followed and then the entire team would've been gone in the blink of an eye. It was pure luck; fortune was the only thing that had saved them.

Was retreating the right call? If one of them had been cut down as they withdrew, then the majority of them, if not the entire team would have followed. The only reason it didn't happen that way was because their luck had held. Haruhiro was glad that it worked out, but he also knew that it wasn't due to some brilliant decision he made in the heat of the moment. It was because they had gotten lucky.

"What now?" Ranta whispered.

Good question, Haruhiro thought. What were they going to do now? Going back in was out of the question. They were too outmatched; it wasn't a fight they could win. If even Team Renji was struggling, then it was impossible for them. And struggling was probably an understatement—Team Renji looked like they were going to be overwhelmed sooner or later. Maybe they were all dead already.

Haruhiro looked up. When he saw the gazes of all his companions locked on him, only then did he realize that his eyes had been glued to the floor this entire time. Why was everyone looking at him? Oh yeah… because he was the leader. Everyone looked to him for instructions, for a decision. What were they going to do now?

Even if that was the question they were all silently asking him, he didn't know. He couldn't make a decision and he wished that they would quit trying to shove the responsibility onto him. He didn't have what it took to be a leader. The responsibility was too heavy a burden to bear. I can't do it. I can't. There was too much death. Everyone was dead and he was afraid. Just quit it. Stop it already.He was terrified that his friends would die too.

She had already died. Choco. And Haruhiro's companions would follow. Even Team Renji would die. Just like Choco, everyone would die. He wanted to say to the others, I'm finished, I'm done. I can't make a decision, so quit looking at me. He didn't want to be the leader anymore. He couldn't do it; he had no idea what to do. He wanted to tell the others to go do whatever they want. Just do whatever the hell you guys feel like. Don't look at me for answers and don't expect me to have any. He couldn't shoulder the weight, he couldn't lead.

Let's just all die. The situation was hopeless and there was nothing left to do but die. That was his decision and if anyone had a problem with it, then they could be the leader instead. They could come up with another idea. They could tell him what to do next.

But he kept those thoughts to himself. No way he could say something like that out loud because if he did, their party would fall apart. He could imagine it happening in his mind's eye. He had to keep himself from falling apart for their sake. No, that wasn't right. He would be lying to himself if he said that he was doing it for the others.

In the end, it was for his own sake. Even in a desperate situation like this, Haruhiro wanted to keep up appearances, wanted to act cool. He didn't want to disappoint his companions. He might not be a great leader and maybe he would never become one, but he didn't want the others to see him as bottom of the barrel pathetic. He didn't want the others to hate him and he didn't want them to abandon him. No matter how things ended, Haruhiro wanted to be part of this team until the very end.

When it really mattered, this was the type of person he turned into? He wasn't a Manato, but this? No, it was too pitiful. There was a limit to how pathetic he could be. If he said what was really on his mind, it wasn't merely a matter of coming off as uncool.

"I'm going to assess the situation," he announced instead. "Stay here."

Everyone was currently perched a little ways up the stairs. Even from here, they could hear the sounds of pitched battle but no one knew what was really going on. No one wanted to know. That's why they were hiding here. That's why no one wanted to leave this spot, Haruhiro included. But doing something was better than enduring the greedy stares of the others demanding answers from him. Maybe it was too harsh to call it "greedy" but that's what it felt like. Their gazes were terrifying. He descended the stairway, reached the ground floor, and poked his head out.

"Renji…" he whispered through gritted teeth.

Team Renji was still fighting doggedly. Ron and Chibi were covered in blood, struggling to defend Sassa and Adachi from the orc onslaught. Renji was still heroically fighting Zoran one on one. Zoran looked mostly uninjured while Renji bore so many wounds that Haruhiro didn't know how to begin to describe it. Even so, Renji was still on his feet, dodging Zoran's attacks and moving without pause. Renji was epic. There was no other way to describe it.

There were maybe five or six other reservists still in the fight, but the orcs had hardly suffered any casualties. How did the situation become this bad?

Everyone had come down to the first floor through the roof access stairway and then spread out to search the watchtowers. Zoran had not been present then. Had the Guardian and his underlings been hiding somewhere? There were other rooms besides the watchtowers on the ground floor, but all of them had been searched and cleared out. Zoran hadn't been on the first floor then. Maybe there was a hidden sublevel? Zoran concealed himself down there, biding his time and waited for the reservists to scatter to the watchtowers before coming out. Haruhiro guessed it was something like that, at any rate.

Zoran's honor guard consisted of twenty orcs, including three shamans. They were the elites, plainly two or three times stronger than the average orc. Team Renji consisted of five members, there were six—make that five, other reservists, and six in Haruhiro's party. The orcs not only outnumbered them, but their fighting ability was probably superior, too. Was this what you called a hopeless situation?

The party-less reservists would go down first. Then the orcs would eliminate one or two members of Team Renji, and the fight would be hopelessly lost. What about the current situation though?

In terms of numbers, the sixteen here wasn't their entire force. Kajiko and her Wild Angels were still searching one of the watchtowers. They were eighteen in number; at least fifteen even if they lost a few. Kajiko herself was a strong fighter. If they joined the fight, the tables would turn in moments. What about Bri? He said that he was going to check the situation at the main gate. The strategy had called for the reservists to act as a distraction while the regular army broke through the main gate and took down the fortress. Maybe it was taking them longer than anticipated, but the regular army would come sooner or later. Supposedly. When the army arrived the battle would turn in their favor for sure.

Should Haruhiro and the others wait then? If they stayed hidden in the watchtower stairwell until reinforcements arrived… no. There was no way of knowing when reinforcements would get here. If Team Renji got wiped out before then, they were all finished. The orcs would search the keep for any human survivors and eliminate them. Even if they hid at the very top of the watchtower, they would be found sooner or later.

They couldn't wait for the regular army, but Kajiko… maybe it was worth the risk to wait on her. They could remain where they were until Kajiko got here. Would Renji's party be

able to hold out until then? Haruhiro honestly wished he could say yes. He didn't want to put his companions in danger. Team Haruhiro would stay hidden, Team Renji would stay alive, and Kajiko would come. The tide would then turn in their favor. It was the ideal scenario, but there was no guarantee things would work out that way.

A part of Haruhiro wanted to help Renji, too. To Team Renji, Haruhiro and his party might have been worthless dregs, but it didn't change the fact that they all arrived here at the same time. And Team Renji now stood at a precipice. Haruhiro grasped the terrible significance of this moment of decision and deciding to do nothing now didn't sit well with him. If he failed to take action, he would never sleep well at night again.

There was one more consideration to take into account: Team Renji needed to be alive when Kajiko arrived. Haruhiro didn't know how good the Wild Angels were, but if they lost Renji, his team, and the remaining five reservists, Kajiko's arrival would at best even out the numbers. Depending on how many she'd lost, the orcs might still have a numerical advantage. Zoran was too strong for him to assume that Kajiko's Wild Angels could win against the orcs alone. And if Kajiko lost, then Team Haruhiro was in danger of dying too.

How long had he been standing here deliberating? Haruhiro didn't know but he knew that they didn't have any more time to dawdle. He didn't know much else, but he knew that he had to hurry and make a decision.

If they sat back and did nothing, they would probably all die. Actually, all of them already had one foot in the grave. Thinking about it that way, things seemed more clear. Choco… I might be able to see you again soon. We can take our time talking and recall all the things we've forgotten, one by one.

Haruhiro returned to where his companions were waiting.

I'm sorry, everyone. I know it's horrible of me to ask, but we need to get back in there, is what Haruhiro wanted to say, but he didn't.We have to help Renji. We'll go after the shamans. The other orcs are less of a threat. He didn't give voice to that either.

"The orc shaman Avaael is probably down there," Haruhiro said instead. "His head is worth fifty gold. Zoran might be too tough for us to take on, but we can definitely claim Avaael's bounty. It's fifty gold. Let's do it." He was lying to his companions; lying to himself. But for some reason, he didn't feel the least bit guilty.

“YESSSSSSS!” Ranta exclaimed. “FIFTY GOLD! ALLLLLLLLRIGHT!”

Ranta was as simpleminded as they came. He started to rush down the stairs, eyes glittering with the prospect of hitting the jackpot.

Haruhiro patted Mogzo on the back. “We’re counting on you, Mogzo. I know you won’t let us down.”

“Right!” Mogzo replied with swift confidence that surprised even Haruhiro. He followed Ranta down the steps.

Next, Haruhiro nodded once to Mary, Yume, and Shihoru. That was good enough, right? Yes, it would have to do. The moment they reached the bottom of the spiral staircase, Haruhiro spotted a shaman. They would take all the shamans down one by one. Haruhiro pointed to Shaman A.

“Him first!” he ordered.

Team Haruhiro attacked as a single, unified unit. They ignored both Zoran and the orcs in his honor guard. Shaman A noticed Haruhiro and the others approach and began to open the lid on the flask at its hip, but it was too late.

“[ANGER THRUST]!” shouted Ranta.

Ranta lodged his sword into the base of the shaman’s throat for an instant kill. They were off to a good start, but Haruhiro suppressed the urge to let that small victory affect him. Stay calm, pick off the shamans one by one… The honor guard orcs noticed their presence now and lumbered over, but Mogzo leapt out to meet them first, roaring a guttural battle cry. Haruhiro spotted another shaman.

“Him next!” Just as Haruhiro pointed to Shaman B, Zoran’s guards went to cover him. The orcs realized what Team Haruhiro was up to now.

It didn’t matter. They would force their way through without getting distracted from their real target. Mogzo stepped to the front, cutting open a path for them. Haruhiro blocked incoming attacks relentlessly with [SWAT]. Shihoru used [SHADOW BIND] to immobilize nearby orcs while Mary rained blows down with her staff, forcing the orcs to block with their shields and back away. Yume did the same by hurling throwing knives left and right, exclaiming each toss with a cat-like “rawr!” noise. Haruhiro wondered what that was about, but whatever.

Ranta was the first to reach the now wide-open Shaman B. From this range, he could use that skill…

“[PROPEL LEAP]!”

Just as Ranta reached Shaman B, he rotated his body around so that his back was to the orc. From Shaman B’s point of view, it must have looked like an attacking human had come at him then suddenly and inexplicably turned around. Before the shaman could make sense of it, Ranta’s butt had crashed into him and Shaman B stumbled backwards in shock. Ranta’s ass attack had knocked it off balance and it looked like it was going to fall over.

Now! Haruhiro thought and dashed towards the fallen shaman at full speed. He rushed just slightly past it, reversed the grip on his dagger and buried the blade into the side of the shaman’s neck. It was the modified [BACKSTAB] technique, borrowed from Sassa. Shaman B went down instantly.

“That’s two down!” Haruhiro called out.

As if the announcement suddenly instilled renewed vigor in Team Renji and the other reservists, the humans began to assault the orcs anew. It was all about momentum. Momentum and morale. But now’s not the time to get caught up in the excitement and act carelessly, Haruhiro thought, more to himself than anyone else. But if not now, then when?

“We can do this!” Haruhiro encouraged.

He didn’t know whether he should have acted with more restraint, but he didn’t want to regret being overly cautious. The situation might have called for it, but now wasn’t the time to hesitate. The tide could turn again at any moment and then it would be too late. It wasn’t the time to be afraid of making the wrong call.

“We can defeat them!” he shouted again. “Fight!”

A familiar high-pitched battle cry filled the room. Once the momentum shifted, good things happened… she was here, the owner of that terrifying voice: Kajiko and her Wild Angels. They poured out of a watchtower staircase, Kajiko in the lead. Two of Zoran’s honor guard were cut down—cut to pieces—right off the bat. When Haruhiro saw that, he no longer doubted that they could win.

If they kept this up, total victory was theirs. And at that moment, Haruhiro believed it without a shred of doubt.

The last orc shaman, it had to be Avaael, let out a jet of fire towards the Wild Angels who were still coming down the staircase. But it wasn't just fire… he had shot something else at them as well. Ropes? No, they were moving, squirming. Snakes. Live snakes. And not just one or two, but scores of them. They were slithering furiously along the ground at the feet of the Wild Angels. Cries went up as the all-female clan was thrown into a hysteria.

Zoran Zesshu then suddenly disengaged from Renji and went after the main body of the Wild Angels, double swords hacking and slashing in a frenzy. Four, five of the Wild Angels died in the blink of an eye.

"Don't panic!" Kajiko commanded as she moved to stop Zoran.

They clashed. Kajiko's sword met Zoran's double blades in a shower of sparks.

PART 2 of 3

Kajiko backed, not because she wanted to, but because she was forced to by Zoran's raw strength.

"Shit!" Kajiko cursed. "We can't take any more losses! Everyone except Mako, Kikuno, and Azusa retreat!"

Those she didn't name did as they were told. Renji came chasing after Zoran and it looked like he got through, but his attack was suddenly effortlessly turned aside by the Guardian. Zoran was toying with him. The orc boss was toying with a person like Renji. But Renji was injured and exhausted. No way he wasn't fatigued. Something had to be done about his wounds at the very least.

Chibi, however, was occupied with healing Ron. If Haruhiro remembered correctly, light magic had a good cast range. Priests could use healing magic at a distance. And they had a Priest, someone besides Chibi.

"Mary!" Haruhiro said. "Heal Renji!"

"He needs to stop moving first!" came Mary's reply. "Heal spells have a limited area of effect!"

“Limited area!?” Haruhiro echoed.

Oh yeah… Healing magic’s light spells illuminated the area where they were cast and only worked if the person being healed remained there throughout the duration. While Renji remained engaged with Zoran, he couldn’t stay in one spot.

“But Renji’s not gonna last like this!” Haruhiro said. They had to give Renji a chance to rest, even for a few seconds.

“I’ll go! I got this!”

The voice didn’t belong to Ranta. It was Mogzo. There was no hesitation, no doubt as Mogzo clashed violently with Zoran. His swings were powerful and fast; each blow was forceful and heavy. They were almost on par with Deathpatch’s attacks. Zoran was forced onto the defensive. Renji was about to renew his offensive as well—hold on! That defeated the entire purpose of Mogzo going in. Haruhiro grabbed Renji’s arm.

“No!” Haruhiro yelled. “You need to get yourself healed!”

“Let go,” Renji said.

“Forget it!” Haruhiro replied. “Mary, now!”

“Understood!” Mary etched the hexagon emblem in the air as she ran towards them and pressed her palm to Renji. “O light, under the divine grace of Lord Luminous… [CURE]!”

As soon as the God of Light’s spell took effect, Renji stopped resisting. Haruhiro didn’t know whether he resigned himself to getting healed or what, but he no longer tried to move. Mary healed Renji’s head and shoulder injuries first, then pressed her hand to the deep gashes on his chest and ribs. But no matter how many times Mary healed him, there were so many wounds, it seemed like she would never be done. Renji’s breathing was labored and his face looked ashen as well. He had lost too much blood.

Ranta was busy with one of Zoran’s underlings and Yume with another. Yet another was coming for the exposed Shihoru and Haruhiro intercepted it with [SWAT] just in time.

“That’s enough,” Renji said, cutting down the orc that had attacked Shihoru with one savage blow of Ishh Dogrann’s sword before running towards Zoran. “Outta the way, dimwit!” he said to Mogzo. “Zoran’s my opponent!”

“No way!” Mogzo said. “Don’t try to take him alone!”

Mogzo shifted to his left, leaving a spot open on the right. Renji moved in smoothly, filling the gap. It was two versus one now.

“And I’m not a dimwit!” he yelled. Mogzo swung his sword in all directions endlessly. In his all-out offensive. He never paused, even for breath.

Renji also made Ishh Dogrann’s blade dance in his hands. To Haruhiro, the two of them were the amalgamation of power and finesse; Mogzo with the power and Renji the finesse. Mogzo fought with strength, Renji with technique. Between the two of them, even the dual-wielding Zoran had his hands full fending off their attacks. The scene before his eyes was so incredible, Haruhiro could hardly believe it.

“That’s right!” Renji replied. “No, you’re not! Show me what you’ve got, Mogzo!”

He was like a different person… or perhaps Mogzo was really like this all along. He must have been called dimwitted and dumb all the time. They couldn’t remember who they were or where they were from before they had come to Grimgar, but the effects of the relentless teasing must have remained with him. That’s why Mogzo never had much self-confidence.

But then he joined with Haruhiro and the others. They fought together and struggled together, and Mogzo had become an outstanding person. Mogzo was the core of their team. If something happened to Haruhiro, then Mary could fill the role of leader and the team would be able to move on. But without Mogzo, they would be in trouble. He was irreplaceable and everyone knew it. Mogzo was the most dependable of all of them and he knew that the team relied on him.

He remembered that now and his self-confidence had returned with a vengeance. Finally, he was fighting at his full potential. And it wasn’t just in this battle, his newfound confidence would serve in all the ones to come, too.

Renji had misjudged. Mogzo truly belonged with Team Renji. But since Renji had underestimated him and passed him up, he had joined Haruhiro’s team instead. For that, Haruhiro felt obligated to thank Renji for giving them the chance to meet Mogzo and having things work out this way.

“Letting boys do all the fighting ain’t my style!” Kajiko said and attacked Zoran from the back.

Zoran sidestepped and jumped back. The orc boss ran. That Zoran Zesshu was actually running away from them.

“We split the reward evenly!” Kajiko shouted.

“Back off!” Renji demanded.

Kajiko’s reply was to chase after Zoran. Renji and Mogzo weren’t far behind.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!” Ranta shouted.

Avaael. The orc shaman shot a stream of fire at Ranta, who couldn’t avoid it and was engulfed instantly by the flames. Avaael was nimble and quick, using hit and run tactics to avoid being attacked. Ranta and the others were having a horrible time trying to pin him down.

“Mary! To Ranta!” Haruhiro said.

“I know!” Mary acknowledged.

“Yume, cover Shihoru!” he said next.

“Waah!” came Yume’s reply.

“Waah? What’s that supposed to mean!?” Haruhiro asked, having no idea what she was saying.

It didn’t matter because Yume shifted over to stand closer to Shihoru. Maybe she meant to say “yeah”…

“Oom rel eckt pram das!” Shihoru chanted.

Shihoru’s [SHADOW COMPLEX] spell hit its target and caused it to fall into a state of confusion, but it was like a bucket of water on a goddamn forest fire. There were more than ten of Zoran’s honor guard orcs left, not to mention Zoran himself and Avaael. They only had Team Renji’s five, Team Haruhiro’s six, four remaining from the Wild Angels, and three other scattered reservists. Wait… that means they won? No, they had the advantage in numbers but it hardly meant victory.

Avaael toasted another reservist with his fire stream attack. The guy took the brunt of it and went down. Crap, someone had to heal him. Actually, his clothing was distinctly Priest class. Even if it was on fire. In that case, he would have to take care of himself. Even if he wasn't in any condition to. Because neither Chibi nor Mary could be spared to heal him.

"We're going after Avaael!" Haruhiro declared.

Mogzo, Renji, and Kajiko were too busy with Zoran. Ron was covering Sassa, Chibi, and Adachi and wasn't in a position to move.

"Mako, Kikuno, Azusa!" Haruhiro called, recalling the names of the remaining members of the Wild Angels. "Avaael is the priority!"

Each of the three was engaged with one of Zoran's guards, but one of them had just finished off her opponent. She was a Warrior almost as big as Kajiko. Avaael was probably waiting for that exact moment. The orc shaman shuffled quickly towards her and opened up the flask at his belt. Insects came swarming out. Before the woman could react, the swarm of insects was on her. She screamed.

The woman attempted to swat the bugs away. It was a reflexive response and Haruhiro couldn't blame her, but it was still not the right reaction. Instead, she needed to get some distance between herself and Avaael, and this time, the shaman didn't run. Instead, he purposely approached her, intending to do… something. But maybe this was his chance, and even as Haruhiro thought that, he was moving.

Avaael was armed with a short mace. He clobbered the woman in the knee first and then smashed it into her head. The woman's helm prevented the blow from being lethal, but she still went down in a heap. Avaael then spun around. Crap! The shaman had noticed Haruhiro's approach.

"Gashu grasha!" the shaman hissed, swinging the mace at Haruhiro.

The mace wasn't large, so Haruhiro could have deflected it with his dagger but he was already ducking out of reflex before he realized what he was doing. Avaael was running away before Haruhiro even managed to straighten.

"He's fast!" Haruhiro gasped.

As he went after the shaman, Haruhiro wondered if he was making the correct decision. Right or wrong, he had no idea, but he knew that letting Avaael run around doing whatever he wanted wasn't good. The shaman was too dangerous. He could whittle their numbers down one by one until the orcs had the advantage again.

Haruhiro was terrified though. Could someone like him handle Avaael alone? He didn't think Avaael was the type of opponent that anyone could handle alone.

"Whoa!" Haruhiro hurriedly threw himself to the ground again because Avaael had suddenly turned around and Haruhiro thought that the shaman was going to throw another attack at him.

Haruhiro's instincts were right. A jet of flame roared over his head. If he had been a half second slower to react, he would have been caught and roasted alive. Avaael ran again and Haruhiro pushed himself back up to chase; this time though, he kept a little more distance between them. This isn't going to work, Haruhiro thought to himself. He couldn't catch Avaael and even if he could, there was the problem of what to do once he did.

He was worried about his companions, but he knew he couldn't take his eyes off Avaael, even for a moment. Meanwhile, Avaael occasionally stole looks back at Haruhiro. Then all of a sudden, Haruhiro lost sight of him. The shaman was gone. Haruhiro stopped cold in his tracks.

"Osshu!" barked one of Zoran's underlings as he attacked Haruhiro.

Haruhiro dodged and backed away, but another orc came charging at him from behind. Just as the second orc got into attack range, Haruhiro twisted sharply away to let the second orc crash head-on into the first one. While the two orcs untangled themselves, Haruhiro slipped away. He scanned the room as he moved. How could he have suddenly lost sight of Avaael?

It wasn't possible. The ground floor was entirely open space so he would find the shaman sooner or later if he kept looking. But no matter how much Haruhiro searched, the shaman was nowhere to be found. Avaael had simply disappeared. Now that he thought about it, Avaael always seemed to disappear and reappear. But that was impossible, of course. Actually, Avaael was simply dodging behind the other orcs and then appearing again when everyone's attention had turned elsewhere.

Haruhiro wanted Avaael to think that he had turned his attention elsewhere, too. To Avaael, Haruhiro had lost interest and forgotten about him. Then the shaman would come out to attack. So when Avaael appeared again and began moving towards Ron, Sassa, and the others, Haruhiro pretended not to see. Or maybe it was towards the two remaining Wild Angels members? Wait, or was it towards Renji, Mogzo, and Kajiko? Damn, the shaman's movements were hard to predict.

Is that how Avaael closed in and attacked by surprise? In that case, Haruhiro mimicked him. Like the Thief he was, Haruhiro stole Avaael's movement techniques. Then, he figured it out. Avaael's next target.

It was Adachi. Team Renji's Mage was using Kanon water and ice spells to obstruct and injure enemy orcs. Avaael was intending to get into range to throw a fire spell at Adachi but the moment before the shaman could, Haruhiro struck with [BACKSTAB].

"What—!?"

Just before Haruhiro's dagger found its mark, Avaael twisted around. Haruhiro's dagger sunk itself into the shaman's left shoulder. Haruhiro's attack had failed, but rather than counterattack, Avaael ran. It seemed that the orc shaman was the type who didn't engage in a fight unless the odds were overwhelmingly in his favor. He sure was meticulous. It was cowardly, yeah, but smart too. Cunning.

With that, Avaael probably figured Haruhiro out. The shaman knew that Haruhiro had stolen his strategy and was using it against him now. The same thing wouldn't work twice. He couldn't let Avaael get away again. If he did, the shaman would constantly be on his guard for the same trick and there would no longer be any openings for Haruhiro to exploit.

"[MODIFIED PROPEL LEAP]!"

Avaael yelped in surprise. In that moment, he had no idea what happened. The orc shaman never imagined that some human would fly at him from the side and attack him with his butt. Eating Ranta's ass attack, the shaman stumbled back. What the hell is up with Ranta's timing!? It was perfect. Too good. So good it was dirty.

Now that the fight was completely in their favor, Haruhiro was confident he could finish it even if the line didn't appear for him. Being extra cautious, Haruhiro used [WIDOW MAKER] rather than [BACKSTAB]. He jumped onto Avaael's back, put the shaman in a

full nelson hold, then jammed his dagger up under the shaman's chin in a single, swift motion before leaping away.

"NOOOOO!" Ranta groaned.

Was the kid an idiot? Yeah, he was. Ranta lifted up his long sword then brought it diagonally down onto Avaael's neck but it only cut halfway through. Ranta then kicked the orc to dislodge his sword and swung again. And again, then a third time until Avaael moved no more.

"YES!" exclaimed Ranta. "Got my fifty gold! AND a Vice!"

Ranta was Ranta and would always be Ranta. It was really quite admirable. Or not. Yeah, not.

"Only Zoran now!" Haruhiro said.

Several of Zoran's underlings were left, but Zoran Zesshu was the priority. With the ever present danger of Avaael's backup out of the picture now, it was truly three on one. They could win.

"MOG—!" Just as Haruhiro called out to Mogzo, Zoran jumped into the air.

The orc boss somersaulted forward, avoiding Kajiko's swing at his back and flew away from Mogzo and Renji who were attacking from the front.

"What—!?" exclaimed Renji.

"Damn it!" Kajiko cursed.

"Huh?" said Mogzo.

Zoran let out a long, ear-shattering roar and then spun. He added several full rotations to his front flip before landing. Then he began to spin horizontally like a top. He was fast and the spin was incredibly powerful. Renji and Mogzo couldn't do anything but back away, and even then, they didn't back up fast enough. Both their swords got caught by Zoran's rotating blades and Renji and Mogzo were sent flying.

The orc then pressed the attack on Mogzo without hesitation. When Renji approached to back Mogzo up, Zoran turned to him immediately, using a single, powerful sword stroke to drive Renji back. The orc then slashed at Mogzo again with both blades.

Kajiko let out another high-pitched cry as she attacked Zoran from behind. Zoran spun around and forced her to retreat with one swing then another of each of his double blades. Then he turned his attention to Mogzo once more, going after the human stubbornly and methodically. When Renji attempted to interfere, Zoran swiftly did that forward somersault-spin combo and returned his focus on Mogzo.

Why? Why was Zoran so intently focused on only him? Mogzo was barely blocking the orc boss' attacks with his sword; his plate armor was in tatters and his helm dented and crushed in. It was like Zoran was whittling Mogzo down little by little. Haruhiro wanted to help, but he didn't know how.

Emboldened by Zoran's vicious offensive, the other orcs started to chant "Osshu! Osshu!" as they attacked the humans anew. One of them came after Haruhiro, too, and even as he blocked with [SWAT] he knew that he was outmatched. The orc was too strong and its attacks nearly ripped the dagger out of his hand.

"PARUPIROOOO!" Ranta shouted.

Ranta's backup arrived just in time to prevent Haruhiro from getting into a really bad situation. But why the hell is he calling me that!?Ranta did save him though.

"Argh!" Kajiko yelped as Zoran's blade ripped her helm off her head. Her entire face was covered in blood.

"Get her away from here!" Renji shouted angrily, and one of the three remaining Wild Angels members came and dragged Kajiko away.

They were finished. The fight was lost. Haruhiro really thought that they could win when Kajiko and the Wild Angels arrived but he was wrong. Zoran Zesshu was not Ishh Dogrann. He was just too strong. He wasn't an orc, he was a goddamn monster. But Haruhiro also noticed something… something off about Zoran that he couldn't quite describe. Balance. Yes, that was it. Balance. What about it? Zoran's body, the orc's left and right sides. Whenever Haruhiro turned to look, Zoran was always turning to his left. The exception was when he did that spinning attack, he spun to his right. Why? Haruhiro couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it nagged at him.

“PARUPIRO QUIT SPACING OUT!” Ranta yelled.

Haruhiro wasn’t spacing out though. And he wasn’t Parupiro either. Ranta might think he was daydreaming, but Haruhiro’s mind was racing. And he had a feeling that he was onto something significant. Zoran was dual-wielding, but… could Zoran possibly be left-handed? What made him think that?

Because of the occasional stiffness in Zoran’s movements. He handled the sword in his left hand way more smoothly than the sword in his right. The orc never really swung the sword in his right hand up and down. All he did was thrust it forward, and it seemed like the muscles in that entire sword arm were tensed all the time… like they were overexerting themselves to prop something up.

An old shoulder injury or wound to his right side, for example. If not, then Zoran wouldn’t be moving like that. It wasn’t as if he was doing it on purpose, but flesh and bone naturally worked around injuries like that. Renji and Mogzo were fighting Zoran up close and they probably didn’t notice. Haruhiro was watching from afar, so he picked up on the slight incongruity.

So what now?

“Ranta!” Haruhiro said.

“What!?” replied Ranta.

“Do you want a hundred gold!?”

“HELL YEAH! Why even ask!?”

“Then you’re gonna have to draw Zoran’s attention!” said Haruhiro. “You’re the only one who can do it!”

“Ha! So you’ve finally figured out how to use me to my full potential!” Ranta declared. “Tell me what to do!”

Haruhiro quickly explained. Ranta’s job was dangerous, but not difficult. For a Dread Knight like Ranta, it wasn’t about succeeding or failing, all he had to do was try. That made it easy. The problem was communicating the plan to Renji and Mogzo.

“Mogzo! Renji!” Haruhiro called. “Zoran’s got a habit of favoring his left when he turns! He’s weak on his right side! Maybe an old injury or something! Ranta’s gonna attack head-on! You two hit him from behind!”

Did they understand what he was talking about? And even if they did, would they be able to pull it off? There was no way to be sure. Haruhiro glanced in Mary’s direction. She and Yume were covering Shihoru, fending off attacks from Zoran’s underlings. Shihoru was casting [Shadow Bind] at an orc further away.

Choco… I hope you’re still alive. But her prone form was on the ground, lifeless. Once you’re dead, everything is finished. And so it was time to finish this, too. Time to bring things to a end.

“Ranta, you ready!?” Haruhiro asked.

“I’m a hundred gold ready!” came Ranta’s reply.

“That’s the spirit!” Haruhiro took off towards Zoran at a run, even as the orc rained vicious blows down on Mogzo and Renji.

Zoran was sharp. Haruhiro was moving to get into position at Zoran’s back, but Zoran saw him coming from a mile away. But that was fine, because…

“Hey, pigface!” Ranta taunted, jumping out right in front of Zoran. “I’m more than enough for a wimp like you! You hear me, pigface!? Fight me, you big, fat piggy!” Ranta thrust the point of his longsword at Zoran’s face in a dramatic pose.

Yeah, he distracted Zoran just like Haruhiro wanted but damn, Ranta was crass. Even if orcs didn’t speak the same language, he figured Zoran knew that he was being insulted—and it pissed the orc off immediately. Zoran did a front-flip and started spinning again, shouting his rage all the while.

“[PROPEL LEAP]!”

Rather than get knocked back, Ranta jumped back first in an attempt to avoid Zoran’s spinning blades but it wasn’t far enough. When he landed, he was still in range of Zoran’s attack.

“GAWRRRRRRRR!” Zoran roared.

“Idiot!” Ranta scoffed. “I see right through you, pig—[PROPEL LEAP]!”

It seemed like Ranta had pushed his luck too far and was now frantically trying to get away, but every time he used [PROPEL LEAP] to put distance between them, Zoran immediately closed the gap. It was exactly as Haruhiro planned. In battle, Mogzo and Renji were way more skilled than Ranta. If Ranta was fighting Zoran one-on-one, Ranta would definitely lose. However, it wasn't as if the two of them did everything better than Ranta. There was one thing neither of them could match Ranta in.

When Zoran performed that somersault-spin combo, there wasn't anything Renji and Mogzo could do but defend with their swords. It wasn't just the first time, when the technique had caught them by surprise, but every time after that too. Neither Mogzo nor Renji were dumb enough to let themselves get caught a second time, but even if they knew the technique was coming, all they could do was block. The attack was too fast and the range was too long for the two Warriors to properly avoid it.

But Ranta could and did dodge it. Part of it was the [PROPEL LEAP] skill, because it allowed those of the Dread Knight class to disengage from an opponent when Warriors couldn't. In other words, a Dread Knight like Ranta was better equipped to counter that technique than Warriors like Renji and Mogzo.

"GAWRRRR! GAWRRRRRR!" Zoran chased.

"[PROPEL LEAP]! [PROPEL LEAP]!" Ranta retreated.

The orc boss was infuriated. He couldn't seem to catch Ranta, which enraged him beyond reason. Thanks to that, Haruhiro was now at Zoran's back, chasing. So were Renji and Mogzo.

"Remember, he favors his left!" Haruhiro said.

If they were going to attack, it would have to be from the right or the back. Zoran rapidly countered attacks from the left, so if they hit him from the right or from behind, where Zoran was a touch slower, they would have time. Not a lot of it, but some.

"Hahaha!" Ranta laughed. "You can't kill me if you can't catch me!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Zoran roared and attacked with the somersault-spin combo again. And once more, Ranta used [PROPEL LEAP] to dodge it. However, the moment Zoran came out of his spin, Renji attacked from the right. It was a single silent, swift, sharp and savage strike. He had approached quickly and quietly, then

chopped down at Zoran with his sword. And Zoran's reaction was… just as Haruhiro expected.

The orc spun towards his left, swinging the sword in his left hand in a backhanded arc, and blocked Renji just in time. But it was close. One fraction of a moment slower, and Renji would've had him. Though the attack had failed, it was still different this time as Zoran's sword was knocked aside. But the orc was dual-wielding. He swung his other sword at Renji's stomach.

Renji had put everything he had into that one attack, betting that it would connect. He hadn't left any way to defend himself if it failed and now he was wide open. Zoran got him.

"Ugh…!" Renji groaned as Zoran's sword connected with armor. It didn't penetrate through the steel plates, but it was a clean hit. Renji went down.

Shit! His plan had failed. Haruhiro stopped in his tracks, but Mogzo kept going.

"THANK YOU!"

[RAGE CLEAVE] or not, it was too reckless. Mogzo had put all his power into the technique, bringing his sword up high overhead and slashing down diagonally. But Zoran wasn't caught by surprise this time. The orc was ready and waiting. Zoran didn't even block; the orc was faster so he attacked first. He hit Mogzo in the left shoulder, then the upper right arm, then the right forearm, then the right hip, and finally the head. Zoran's sword came crashing into the upper left side of Mogzo's head.

Haruhiro didn't even know that plate mail and helm could withstand such a beating. None of Zoran's blows had cut through the armor, but that didn't mean Mogzo was okay. His plate mail was dented and unrecognizably misshapen. There was no way Mogzo was alright underneath it, but he was still standing. He wasn't even on one knee or bent over or anything. He was still standing tall and firm.

Oh yeah… the [STEEL GUARD] technique. It allowed Warriors to reinforce their armor and defense for up to twenty minutes to deflect any attack an enemy could throw at them. But to Haruhiro, it didn't look like any of Zoran's attacks were being deflected. Mogzo was taking hit after hit. How much longer could he last? As tough as Mogzo was, no one could take that kind of abuse indefinitely.

Which meant that there was only one thing Haruhiro could do. He moved without thinking. Haruhiro was a Thief. He was a coward who always positioned himself behind an enemy's back and this time was no different. Zoran's attention was wholly was Mogzo. The orc must have been wondering why the human he was pounding relentlessly refused to go down. Strange, weird, inexplicable, Zoran would've thought. Maybe the orc was even starting to get worried.

Haruhiro approached Zoran, aiming for his back. What about the line? No such luck. It didn't matter. Haruhiro knew where he had to target. Zoran was wearing bright crimson plate armor and a helm, but between the helm and chest plate was a small gap. Probably wide enough for his dagger to slip through. Zoran was tall, so Haruhiro reversed his grip on his weapon. He brought it up, aiming for the space between Zoran's neck and upper back.

His dagger slipped through the opening and pierced into flesh. In that instant, Zoran's entire body stiffened. Haruhiro pulled the knife out and was about to stab it in again, but Zoran spun to his left and attacked, forcing Haruhiro to jump away.

"THANKS!"

Just as Haruhiro hit the ground, Mogzo came in again with [RAGE CLEAVE], catching the orc boss right in between neck and shoulder. Zoran viciously kicked Mogzo away, and then began to scramble away from them. I won't let you run! Haruhiro grabbed Zoran's right leg. Zoran immediately stamped his heel into Haruhiro's head and for a moment, Haruhiro blacked out.

When he came to, Kajiko had reengaged. Ron was also nearby. Adachi was hitting Zoran with Kanon magic while Chibi smashed her staff into him. Ranta was also attacking and Shihoru fired [SHADOW ECHO] at Zoran. Yume was slashing frantically with her kukri while Mary pounded on him with her own staff.

Still dizzy from being kicked in the head, Haruhiro wasn't sure what was going on, but it seemed like everyone had ganged up on Zoran and was beating the shit out of him. He sort of understood the reason. Zoran was scary as hell and everyone wanted him dead. Yes, Zoran was terrifying beyond words.

The orc boss was on the ground now and no longer defending himself. Was he still alive? Haruhiro had no idea. What about the orcs in his elite guard? There were a few left, but the majority of them were dead and none of the ones left alive were in any position to help their boss. Now the numbers advantage was firmly on the reservists' side. The entire Wild Angels clan, the reservists that had stayed out of the fighting before now, all of them had reappeared. They surrounded the remaining orcs and would finish them off soon.

Haruhiro touched a hand to his head. No blood. But when he got stomped, his nose and chin had smashed into the ground and he was bleeding from somewhere. It was also a little hard to breathe, so maybe his nose was broken?

"That's enough," Renji said, getting back to his feet.

He pushed Kajiko, his own teammates, and Haruhiro's companions aside as he approached Zoran. Ranta, seemingly angry about something, refused to move. Renji slugged him in the face. He raised Ishh Dogrann's sword high overhead. No one attempted to stop him. Renji brought his sword down, neatly decapitating Zoran.

"There. It's done," Renji declared.

Silence fell in the room.

"Watch out!" someone shouted.

Several of the remaining orcs in the room shouted something their language and tried to attack the Wild Angels. They were beaten back.

"Haru!" Mary came running. "Are you alright?"

Haruhiro nodded. He wanted to say something, but his voice wouldn't work properly.

"A HUNDRED GOLD!" Ranta leapt into the air. "YES!"

"Renji's the one who killed him!" Sassa protested, to which Kajiko shouted, "We split it evenly!"

Haruhiro didn't really care what they did with the money. Well, maybe he cared a little because it was an unfathomable sum. He could use it to learn new skills, or move into more private housing, or buy arms and armor, and plenty else. Maybe armor first. His gear had gotten pretty worn down, so it would have to be repaired or replaced.

Ugh… he couldn't think straight. All of the remaining orcs were dead now and Shihoru was crying in relief that it was all over. Yume wrapped an arm around the Mage's shoulders, patting her head and whispering, "It's okay, it's alright… I'm glad it's over too…"

"Can you stand?" Mary asked him.

Yes. Wait, no. The lie had bubbled to his lips unwittingly, because if he said no, maybe Mary would be nice and sympathetic to him… but he decided against it.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Haruhiro said, getting to his feet. "Forget about me though, I'm more worried about—"

Why was Mogzo just standing there? Everyone else was celebrating the victory, arguing about the money, getting healed or whatever but Mogzo was just standing there. And something seemed off. Both his arms hung limp at his sides and he was no longer holding his sword. Actually, Haruhiro was amazed that he was still able to stand.

In his condition, just being on his feet in and of itself was an impressive feat. His helm wasn't just a misshapen mess, it was slanted off to one side on his head. Blood seeped from all over and trickled to the ground. Then slowly, ever so slowly, he started to fall over. He fell as if the supports holding up something heavy had suddenly been removed.

Mary's breath caught in her throat. Haruhiro called his name.

"Mogzo…?"